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## 'In defence of the decorator' : Giulio Rosso (1897-1976) in Italy in the interwar period

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Master's Degree in Heritage Studies (Honours)

Postgraduate Diploma in Restoration of Architectural Monuments

‘In defence of the decorator’

Giulio Rosso (1897–1976) in Italy in the interwar period

Volume I

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

The Open University

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## Abstract

This dissertation concerns the creative practice developed by the Italian decorator Giulio Rosso (1897–1976) in Italy during the interwar period (1919–1941). Despite post-war critical oblivion, Rosso's contemporary colleagues, intellectuals, and architects appreciated his ability to master an extremely varied repertoire, adapting it to meet different spatial requirements while also updating it through humour and stylistic references to the visual languages of contemporary fine arts and modern media.

This analysis of Rosso's output highlights decoration as a practice worth exploring and distinct from the fine arts. During the 1920s, Rosso took advantage of a new interest in decoration that was developing within the Italian cultural debate. Long despised as the product of negotiations which, arguably, limited the autonomy of the artist, decoration was re-evaluated within the context of the 'Return to Order' for its ability to engage artists in a relationship with society that had previously seemed lost. During the 1930s, Rosso benefited from the fascist regime's commitment to commissioning decorative schemes for public spaces intended for mass spectacles, ritual celebrations, and indoctrination. Rather than imposing an official style, the regime welcomed any decorative approach that conformed the Party's directives. Decorators and artists were sometimes offered opportunities to create extremely innovative and significant experimental works; at other times, they were forced to provide conventionally academic pieces of visual propaganda.

Rosso's decorative schemes for private and public patrons responded to and participated in the complex context of Italian interwar society. This dissertation makes a positive case in favour of his remarkable and unjustly neglected output, highlighting its specific characteristics, circumstances and implications, motives and objectives, possible interpretations, and value as a cultural testimony from a different time.



to Giorgio

*Diceva Ulisse: 'chi m'o ffa fá?*

*La strana idea che c'ho di libertá'*

(Ulysses used to say: 'why would I do it?

It is the strange idea that I have of freedom')

Avion Travel, *Sentimento*



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## Abbreviations

(Nota bene: abbreviations used for Archives and Libraries are expanded in the Bibliography)

BNL, Banca Nazionale del Lavoro

ENAPI, Ente Nazionale Artigianato e Piccola Industria

E42, Esposizione Universale Roma 1942

ETAL, Ente Turistico Alberghiero della Libia

INFPS, Istituto Nazionale Fascista per la Previdenza Sociale

IRFM, Industrie Riunite Francesco Matarazzo

LUCE, L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa

MAI, Museo Artistico Industriale

MAR, Mostra Augustea della Romanità

MRF, Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista

ONB, Opera Nazionale Balilla

PNF, Partito Nazionale Fascista

RACI, Real Automobil Club d'Italia

SALIR, Studio Ars Labor Industrie Riunite

SMIR, Ente Nazionale Sviluppo Marittimo e Industriale di Roma

STIPEL, Società Telefonica Interregionale Piemontese e Lombarda

SVEA, Società per lo Sviluppo Economico dell'Albania

## Introduction. The dream of Giulio Rosso

*'I am persuaded of the subjectivity of historical discourse, that this discourse is the product of a dream; yet a dream that is not entirely free, since the great curtains of images of which it is made must necessarily be insured on hooks: the traces. But among these hooks, desire creeps... for those who choose history, the beginning is through introversion, a sinking towards the roots'.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Giulio Rosso and me

Before I even knew Rosso's name, his works in Rome were familiar to me. The sgraffiti for the San Paolo railway station, for instance, with those fantastic creatures twisting and swirling among the waves, smiling coquettishly, their eyes reduced to simple arches and their mouths in the form of small hearts. The immense carpet of black and white mosaics of the Foro Italico, with its handsome athletes engaging in modern sports, strangely surrounded by threatening figures of Blackshirts, workers, wild beasts, and the obsessively repeated, bellicose and discomfiting symbols of dictatorship. The giant figures frescoed on the wall of a shop (at that time, a bookshop) on the via del Corso, which vividly evoked the sense of gloomy destiny with which Italian neo-realist films are often imbued. Those workers, whether gazing out at the horizon or busy constructing the future of the country, intrigued me with their manifest unease: the disruptive, anti-rhetorical presence of doubt. Their only security, in the grim and hostile landscape which surrounded them, seemed to be offered by the tools that they handle, mute aids to their hard labour, including a beautiful, foreshortened lorry. That lorry compared well with those depicted by arguably the greatest and most significant Italian artist of the interwar period: Mario Sironi (1885–1961). At the time, I did not try to discover the artist's name; I was simply fascinated by those works, observed in passing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Duby, *Il sogno della storia*, (Milan: Garzanti, 1985), pp. 46, 47. All Italian texts have been translated into English by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> All works mentioned in this section will be analysed in the following chapters. The figures are not referenced in this pre-analytical section, which focuses on the impressions (and introspection) triggered by the phenomenological experience of observing these little known works of art.

I first encountered Giulio Rosso's name while working as a research assistant on the book *Roma, memorie della città industriale*.<sup>3</sup> The entry on the San Paolo railway station attributed to Rosso the sea-inspired *sgraffiti* that so many times had stopped me on my way to the platforms.<sup>4</sup> When I asked the author for more information, I was directed to the Archivio Bio-Iconografico of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (GNAM), where there was a file containing a few press clippings ranging from the 1920s to the 1970s (for a detailed examination see the Literature Review, Chapter 1). They referred to Rosso as a designer of applied arts and murals during the interwar period, citing decorative schemes created for architectural complexes built by the fascist regime in Rome, including the Foro Italico (formerly 'Mussolini'), the Città Universitaria (La Sapienza University campus), and the EUR (formerly 'E42'). To me, this seemed a case of an artist who had successfully navigated his way through the *ventennio*, the controversial twenty years of the fascist dictatorship (1922–1943). Further investigations using contemporary architecture and design magazines suggested that Rosso had also been blessed with positive critical appraisal and recognition from private patrons. Nevertheless, after World War II, all traces of his life were lost: even his date and place of death remained uncertain. This dramatic discrepancy between pre-war recognition and post-war oblivion inspired this research project, which aims to understand why and how an artist's creative output can be at one time cherished as highly significant and, in a later period, considered utterly insignificant.

## 2. Objectives and theoretical framework

This dissertation will make the positive case for Rosso's as a remarkable, unjustly neglected body of work carried out in Italy during the interwar period. I am limiting my analysis to his Italian period, setting aside the phase developed after his 1946 relocation to Brazil (where he died in 1976). I shall highlight its specific features, circumstances and implications, motives and objectives, possible interpretations, and value as cultural testimony from a different time. However, it may be useful to acknowledge at the start that I do not aim to return a forgotten star to his place in the art historical canon. Indeed, I align myself with those that do not believe that the discipline must remain 'still

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<sup>3</sup> Enrica Torelli Landini (ed.), *Roma, memorie della città industriale*, (Rome: Palombi, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Vania Ribeca, 'La ferrovia Roma-Ostia e la stazione di Porta San Paolo', in Torelli (2007), pp. 182–188.

addicted to a narrative of geniuses whose achievements demand decoding.<sup>5</sup> This very modest challenge to traditional art history reflects the fact that Rosso was a different type of creator: a decorator, rather than a painter in the fine arts tradition.

As a decorator, Rosso resists a categorisation as a creative ‘genius’, especially if this concept is understood as to refer to ‘self-directed men who regard their work as a free expression of their natures’, with the arts viewed as ‘a place for themselves as a field of individual imagination open to the most daring and fanciful forms.’ Such concepts developed ‘in the course of a long process of social development’, and culminated in ‘the dependence on a commanding patron seem[ing] degrading and incompatible with artists’ dignity.’<sup>6</sup> It came to be believed that artistic practice was necessarily autonomous and unconstrained by contingency. Decoration – a practice that constantly negotiated the terms of its making – was therefore dismissed and downgraded, although always sought after.<sup>7</sup> Although, in Rosso’s time, a hierarchy of the arts was still widely accepted, I reject the hierarchical approach to investigating the visual culture of this period. I reconstruct and assess Rosso’s oeuvre against the backdrop of the rules that shaped his practice. The fundamental values by which Rosso’s work will be valued and appreciated include his technical stylistic versatility, his ability to negotiate and adapt ideas, his willingness to contribute to coherent and harmonious ensembles, and his ability to visually translate discourses of prestige, authority, power and control.<sup>8</sup>

As pointed out by Nicholas Watkins, decoration ‘is one of the most important, but least understood, issues [...] It is an area fraught with contradictions and misunderstandings, particularly for an English-speaking audience. The very word “decoration” conjures up conflicting associations. In English, it is often used pejoratively to imply pretty, but essentially undemanding, minor painting, in French, however, the term *décoration* has

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<sup>5</sup> Glenn Adamson, ‘Design History and the Decorative Arts’, in Peter N. Miller (ed.), *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer Schapiro, ‘Diderot and the artist and society’ (1964), in Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, (New York: George Braziller, 1994), pp. 203–204.

<sup>7</sup> In this dissertation, I use the term ‘decoration’ to denote a specific practice encompassing architectural decoration and applied arts, and, occasionally, ‘ornament’ to refer to the material result of this practice. As noted by Jonathan Massey, possible distinctions between the terms ‘decoration’ and ‘ornament’ are ‘not stable or consistently observed’. Jonathan Massey, ‘Ornament and decoration’, in Graeme Brooker and Lois Weinthal (eds.), *The Handbook of Interior Architecture Design*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 498.

<sup>8</sup> Rosso’s limited production of easel paintings (around a dozen canvases produced for national group exhibitions) will be analysed only to highlight interests and preoccupations that found expression in a medium that the decorator considered secondary in comparison to his main profession.



a much wider range of associations'.<sup>9</sup> The Italian term *decorazione* also has complex and ambiguous connotation. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the profession of 'decorator' has disappeared, although before Modernism successfully imposed its own anti-decorative stance on culture, decorators were included alongside artists and architects within artistic institutions. They completed recognised academic courses (in Italy, these were called *Ornato*), underwent a specialised programme of training, and devoted themselves to expert tasks. Although, throughout the period of study (the years between the two World Wars), the practice of decoration was at the centre of an intense debate (analysed in Chapter 2), its remit did not change much. Filippo Sacchi (1887–1971), in his 1912 essay *Apologia del decoratore* (In defence of the decorator) addressed an ideal decorator, enumerating those peculiar characteristics of the practice that, although considered by many as proof of its inferiority, actually constituted its strength:

'Your work, o decorator, is not free [...] the form of the decorative object will be necessarily referred to its function. Your work will endure not only material limitations, but also in the spirit of its form. Since your work is a work of use, someone will use it, and whoever uses it will pretend that it will benefit not only its function, but also her/his taste; she/he will pretend that it responds to certain aesthetic exigencies. And you are not supposed to address only the exigencies of those who use the product of your labour, but also the intentions of those who collaborate with you. Your work is not isolated; rather, it will be destined for a decorative ensemble: it is necessary that your output is adapted to the work of others, in harmony.'<sup>10</sup>

In 1938, the rationalist architect Giuseppe Pagano (1896–1945), began his book on the Italian decorative arts by reiterating Sacchi's arguments, although in a drier register:

'Among arts and crafts professionals, and architects, decorative art is regarded as the branch that accepts as its determinant reason a functional prerequisite, utilitarian, practical, materially or spiritually necessary, and adheres to it by trying

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Watkins, 'The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic', in Gloria Groom (ed.), *Beyond the Easel*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Filippo Sacchi, *Apologia del decoratore*, (Vicenza: Arti Grafiche Vicentine, 1913), p. 5.

to accomplish a maximum of artistic achievement within the architectural orchestration of which it is an element.’<sup>11</sup>

Both Sacchi and Pagano, writing twenty-five years apart, characterised decoration as different from ‘the pure contemplative values of easel painting and sculpture, detached from anything contingent and necessary’.<sup>12</sup> Decoration ‘resulted in a clash of interests – between freedom and compromise, inspiration and accommodation, challenging self-expression and accessibility, individual and group identity.’<sup>13</sup> It was the result of a multi-layered negotiation: with the function/materiality of the object to be decorated, with the requirements of the patron, and fellow collaborators (architects, decorators, and/or artisans), and with the space that it had to define. It is precisely this negotiation, this constant process of balancing external requests and needs, as well as the elaboration of a personal cypher (enabling to be recognised among others) that makes decoration an extremely interesting practice to investigate. Although it has been neglected by art historical scholarship, decoration can reveal a great deal about the way in which social, political, and economic issues dialogue with creativity. As Eugenio Battisti has argued:

‘profane decoration is a place not much frequented by critics... a hardly passable labyrinth, as it responds to extremely variable motivations, often difficult to interpret... each cycle refers us to a library, a way of reading (and before, of thinking), and a social purpose. It seems to be a work of art: it is, first, a document of the history of mentality.’<sup>14</sup>

This dissertation, while focusing on Rosso’s practice, asks whether decoration is a misinterpreted, discredited, or overlooked practice, which, if properly explored, might shed new light on the visual and material culture of the interwar period.<sup>15</sup>

An additional line of enquiry engages with the relationship between decoration and ideology, asking whether it is possible to see an active and reciprocal influence. I use a

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<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, *Arte decorativa italiana*, (Milan: Hoepli, 1938), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Sacchi (1913), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Michele H. Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 15–16.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in: Anne Dunlop, *Painted Palaces. The rise of secular art in early renaissance Italy*, (Louisville, the Pennsylvania University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> As recently argued by Alina Payne, early twentieth century champions of Modernism shifted the focus of the debate from architectural decoration to the design of the object. Alina Payne, *From ornament to object: genealogies of architectural modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

working notion of ideology as proposed by Nicos Hadjinicolaou: 'the relatively coherent system of ideas, values and beliefs that [people] develop; [...] it expresses the inevitable coalescence of their actual and their imagined relation to the true conditions of their existence.'<sup>16</sup> According to Hadjinicolaou, works of art are carriers of visual ideology, 'a specific combination of the formal and thematic elements of a picture through which people express the way they relate their lives to the conditions of their existence, a combination which constitutes a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class.'<sup>17</sup> This theoretical concept allows me to avoid the potential pitfall of analysing Rosso's work only within the context of the dominant political ideology of the time (Fascism), acknowledging instead that decoration participates in the ideological discourses of diverse agents in different contexts, including: private clients, corporations, entrepreneurs, officials, public bodies, the party, and the state. Although Mussolini's regime (1922–1943) coincided with Rosso's Italian period of creativity (1919–1941), I would argue that the arts were not actively and consistently mobilised to participate in Fascism's self-defining process, until the beginning of the 1930s. Throughout the 1920s, Rosso developed his career as decorator by working mainly for private patrons and corporations; although private commissions did not constitute the bulk of his work, he did continue to receive them into the following decade.

The range and variety of Rosso's patrons made his strategies for responding to them particularly significant. The fascist regime was certainly his most difficult patron, because the ritual and mythical content of its ideology was constantly shaped by Mussolini's changing political agenda. As Rosso's works were carried out in various contexts, they reveal different aspects of the politics of art, as well as the way artists responded to the necessities of politics. At the same time, by working extensively for an elite private clientele, Rosso reflected the ideologies of dominant groups in power, including aristocrats, the scions of wealthy industrial families and members of the new, rampant and entrepreneurial high bourgeoisie. He was also asked to interpret the escapist dreams of a middle class that was enjoying an unprecedented culture of leisure

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<sup>16</sup> Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in: James M. Thompson (ed.), *Twentieth Century Theories of Art*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), p. 250

and consumption, and to fulfil the demands of modern depersonalised authorities, including financial corporations and service providers.

In considering Rosso's production as a set of complex 'cultural signals', rather than part of a general history of forms or styles, I am assuming a material culture-informed perspective. I share Julius Prown's belief that 'objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged.'<sup>18</sup> Drawing on Prown's classification of the materials of Material Culture, this dissertation navigates through grey areas, in which the fine arts overlap with applied arts and architecture; this is the dominion of the decorative arts, of which decorative murals are a sub-category. In selecting objects from Rosso's Italian work that best support my critical discourse, I am taking on the role of a 'decorative art historian', who believes that 'some artefacts (like some paintings) capture the irretrievable webs of meaning that attended the moment of their production better than others'.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach invites dispute, debate, and development. It may also offer a more calibrated model for analysing the output of other professional Italian decorators, ignored or misinterpreted because they were trained to prioritise functions, materials, locations, and patrons, rather than originality, novelty, or stylistic singularity, i.e. the means through which modern artists liberated their work 'from the diktats of patronage'.<sup>20</sup>

In making the argument for decoration as characterised by a negotiation of diverse exigencies requiring creative strategies of visual communication, I draw on Michael Baxandall's assessment of artists as problem-solvers, intentional agents whose volition can be inferred by the researcher.<sup>21</sup> Intentions, according to Baxandall, do not belong to the artist alone: they are social entities that are consciously and unconsciously considered in the 'brief' that informs the design. Decoration, being the expression of a brief developed by a plurality of agents, closely reflects Baxandall's view of a work of art

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<sup>18</sup> Julius David Prown, 'Mind in Matter: an introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 1 (1982), 2, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Adamson (2013), p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Kemp, *Art in History*, (London: Profile Books, 2014), p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, (London: Yale University Press, 1985), p 34.

as the ‘deposit of a social relationship’.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, to balance the passive connotation of the term ‘deposit’, I consider each work of art to be an ‘active shaper of political and cultural values’, as argued by Martin Kemp. According to the latter, a work of art is ‘of its time and place’ and ‘an expression of basic human impulses, above all the impulse to communicate through the making of visual things.’<sup>23</sup> In the following pages, I will assess Rosso’s output by integrating social and visual analysis into a single framework, with a special focus on the contemporary system of patronage and the status of decoration in relation to canonical considerations of artistic agency and architecture. In particular, I will consider the role of the artist/architect/artisan in shaping Rosso’s works, as well as their function, space, value, buyers, and patrons. Issues of form and style will be also considered, although (as discussed in the next section) style will be approached as yet another piece of cultural ‘evidence’ of Rosso’s visual discourse, rather than its main driver or motivation.<sup>24</sup> Finally, I will consider the active social role of the viewer in engaging with the specific material and aesthetic affordances of Rosso’s decorative schemes. In particular, I will highlight how patrons made use of the aesthetic features of works of art to structure specific social activities, mediate social relationships, and shape their own subjectivities.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Method and problems

The Chapter 1 literature review makes clear that post-war studies on Rosso have been episodic and fragmentary. Before the publication of the monographic article by Anna Maria Damigella, there was neither a reliable biography nor a catalogue of works to build on.<sup>26</sup> Thus, my first task, even before formulating a research proposal, was to gather documentary materials that could provide a comprehensive picture of Rosso’s oeuvre. I consulted every magazine dealing with Italian decorative arts during the interwar period: *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, *Casabella*, *Domus*, *Emporium*, *Lo Stile*, *Cellini*, *Le Arti*, *Rassegna dell’Istruzione Artistica*, and *Costruzioni*. I then perused the catalogues of the most important national exhibitions organised during that period: the Venice

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<sup>22</sup> This is the opening sentence of his *Painting and experience in fifteenth century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Kemp (2014), pp. 211, 213.

<sup>24</sup> Julius David Prown, ‘Style as Evidence’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 3 (1980), 197.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Tanner, ‘Michael Baxandall and the Sociological Interpretation of Art’, *Cultural Sociology*, 2 (2010), 249.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Maria Damigella, ‘Giulio Rosso’, *Forme Moderne*, 5 (2010), 8–47.

Biennale, Milan Triennale, and Rome Quadriennale, together with international exhibitions and regional and interprovincial shows coordinated by the fascist Union of the Artists. By the end of this period of research, I had formed an idea of Rosso's activity, including by whom and how positively his works had been reviewed. These data allowed me to move the investigation further and begin digging into archives in search of documents that could shed some light on the nature of Rosso's relationship with architects, manufacturers, artisans, colleagues, and institutions. I spent weeks working in archives all over the country; I met heirs and members of the families of architects and manufacturers who had worked with Rosso, as well as scholars who had studied him. Eventually, I managed to contact Giulio Rosso's son in Sao Paulo, Brazil; he opened to me the doors of the decorator's archive.<sup>27</sup>

Rosso's archive is a cave of wonders: equally full of treasures and problems. Although this archive greatly enhanced my knowledge of Rosso's training, early career, and activities not mentioned by contemporary critics, its nature raised some fundamental questions. When the artist relocated to Brazil, he brought with him a variety of documents from his studio.<sup>28</sup> However, various sources, including letters mentioning cartoons, photographs, and the testimony of Rosso's son, suggest that Rosso left much in Italy: books, magazines, works of art, contracts, and correspondence.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the material kept in Sao Paulo is the product of a process of selection, informed by motivations that are difficult to assess: the practical problem of space, Rosso's own assessment of his works, the pressure of a watershed moment – when he willingly interrupted his career in Italy to start a new one in Brazil – and the consequent need to provide material proof of his skills and background. His involvement in many decorative enterprises commissioned by the defeated fascist dictatorship may have played a part: was his role as an interpreter of the regime's propaganda likely to be an advantage or a disadvantage? This question is closely related to Rosso's motivations in moving to Brazil, which I will examine in the conclusion of this thesis. Here it is important to highlight how

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<sup>27</sup> After contacting Edoardo Rosso in September 2012, I visited and explored Giulio Rosso's Archive (AGR) between 29 January and 4 February 2013. The documents are carefully kept by Giulio's niece, Alessandra Labate Rosso. During my stay, I have interviewed Edoardo, who together with his wife Isabela Labate have been an invaluable source of information.

<sup>28</sup> Rosso's relocation to Brazil, its circumstances, possible motivations and consequences, are analysed in the Conclusion of this thesis.

<sup>29</sup> Rosso's son Edoardo remembers his father's studio scattered with cartoons. Edoardo Rosso, personal interview, 02/02/2014. Rosso always insisted on having his cartoons shipped back as soon as possible. Archive of the Spilimbergo School of Mosaic (ASSM), b. 71, fasc. 109.

one of the most important sources of data for my research project revealed, but also concealed, important aspects of Rosso's career.

After two years of research, a clear picture emerged of an extremely fruitful and varied career, which I could reconstruct almost month by month. At that point, I had to resist 'the vertigo of the list', the temptation to compose a long, intoxicating enumeration of all of the works I had uncovered.<sup>30</sup> However satisfying the feeling of completeness might eventually be, it would not advance a deeper understanding of Rosso's works or explain the sudden change in the critical fortunes of his output. I therefore tried to make sense of his practice, analysing each work in relation to the objectives previously described. I carried out formal, stylistic and iconographical analyses required for traditional art historical research, as well as adopting an approach that took into account the materiality of Rosso's output. As all examples of Rosso's applied arts production had disappeared, I relied on his contemporaries' accounts for a sensory reaction to the objects he designed. In the case of his surviving large decorative schemes for architectural projects, I travelled across Italy to experience the ones that had fortunately survived. I allowed myself to fully experience them, observing them from all points of view permitted by the space; in the case of the floor mosaics, I stood, walked and sat on them. To understand their relationship with the space I sketched them whenever I could. Thus, I set out to construct my narrative, interweaving data, documents, analysis and feelings with information about the design and implementation of each work, how it was received, its historical and social context, and the contemporary visual culture, both high and low.

It seemed clear that any criterion used to effectively assess Rosso's output had to be based on the rules of decoration. A straightforward chronological account would make it difficult to appreciate the consistency of Rosso's creative strategy. His career was frantic, tumultuous, and, above all, incredibly varied. Faced with Rosso's immense output (more than one hundred decorative schemes completed between 1921 and 1941), one is mesmerised by the sheer quantity and diversity of his works, and his ability to simultaneously serve the fascist government and a local restaurant, a lofty hotel and a housing estate, or a luxury ocean liner as well as a night club. Besides, once the documentary fragments of his art are presented in an orderly and chronological fashion,

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<sup>30</sup> Umberto Eco, *Vertigine della lista*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2009).

it becomes evident that style, for Rosso, was just another tool at the service of his preoccupation with space. The Vasarian approach, which assumes that the contribution of each artist is defined by her or his own evolving 'manner', which progressively develops the art forms, reveals its limitations when applied to decoration. I distance myself from this approach: there will be no blue, pink, or jazz period for Rosso.

There is, of course, a recognizable visual language that Rosso mastered during the 1920s and which became his personal cypher; in Chapter 3, I will examine the characteristics of this style. Elements borrowed from the Novecento movement of Margherita Sarfatti (1880–1961) can be detected in works from the turn of the decade, while, at the beginning of the 1930s, Rosso seems to have been receptive to the late developments of Futurism, Pittura Metafisica, Surrealism and even Cubism. Later, Rosso fell increasingly under the spell of the artists of the Scuola Romana. Yet, if the evolution briefly described above can account for his linear stylistic development, Rosso's practice was eminently eclectic and baffles the researcher. Consider the last three mural decorations he designed in Rome in 1941: the frescos for the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (fig. 6.35) and the Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale (fig. 6.55), and the stained-glass window for the E42 Science Museum (fig. 4.32) are in three completely different styles. The first mural is very much in tune with the expressive realism of the Scuola Romana; the second is indebted to Rosso's early 1920s fantasies inspired by nineteenth century prints; the stained-glass window is a pastiche of details stolen from astronomic treatises, illustrations, and books of iconographical references. The contrast is so confusing that it is hard to believe these works were all created by the same hand. How can one account for such unbridled eclecticism?

The answer, once again, lies in the brief to which Rosso was responding: the purpose of each decoration was to express the spirit of the space, reflecting its function, and its identity; to harmonise with the architecture, and to represent the aspirations of the patron. The styles of more established contemporary artists, as well as those from the past, were appropriated by Rosso to match different exigencies: to express modernity, convey particular values, define the tone of a visual communication, and to surprise, amuse, or bewilder the observer. The dominant *trait d'union* of Rosso's approach lay in his response to different typologies of space.



This response was never casual. Although Rosso never explained his strategies or recorded his process on paper, his choices were not random. Indeed, this study will highlight a major element of consistency in Rosso's strategy. At the same time, he sometimes challenged the rules of his practice, showing that he was more than just a talented negotiator of external exigencies of visual communication. Rosso was gifted with a noteworthy ability to re-invent and was capable of personal elaboration. Thus, episodes of contradiction, incongruities, and discontinuities will be pointed out in cases where Rosso's decoration rather than gently enhancing the architecture, participated in the expressive intent of the space, both re-signifying it, and suggesting unexpected readings, shedding light onto the contradictory context in which he lived and worked.

#### 4. Structure of the thesis

In the first chapter, I review the pre- and post-war literature on Giulio Rosso. While an analysis of the former proves that Rosso was highly regarded by critics, intellectuals, architects and artists of the time as a key protagonist in the development of the Italian decorative arts, the latter has completely neglected his output, at least until recently. Once the case for this interesting and potentially revealing unpublished body of work has been made, I analyse the literature on the Italian arts of the interwar period, focusing on the way decoration has been analysed and assessed. I will show how Italian art historical scholarship has struggled to incorporate the arts of the *ventennio* within a national narrative of modernity, reflecting a moral bias against those artists (the large majority) who showed no inclination to resist the fascist dictatorship. A second prejudicial view will also be highlighted: the anti-decorative orthodoxy of modernism, which continues to influence recent studies aiming to revive the interest in the arts of the period.

The following six chapters are divided into two parts. The first part, 'A modern decorator' (Chapters 2–4), analyses how Giulio Rosso became a successful decorator and why he was regarded as a moderniser of both the traditions of mural decoration and applied arts. The works considered in Chapters 2 (Training) and 3 (Beginnings) date back to the 1920s, when the cultural context within which Rosso operated was not yet heavily influenced by the cultural policy of the fascist regime. Chapter 4, which focuses on Rosso's designs for the applied arts, spans the two decades of his activity in Italy, allowing a connection with the second part of the thesis, and anticipating questions

about the emergence of the fascist regime as patron of the arts. The second part of the thesis, 'Spaces and decoration' (Chapters 5–7), explores how Rosso responded to the diverse typologies of the spaces he was asked to decorate. These spaces were extremely diverse: designed for leisure and propaganda, contemplation, enjoyment, education and indoctrination. They covered everything from small surfaces to mosaic floors and murals spanning hundreds of square metres. Four typologies of space are individuated and their decorations investigated, proceeding from the domestic interiors to the public exteriors: private spaces *di rappresentanza* (Chapter 5), commercial and entertainment spaces (Chapter 6) and collective spaces of fascist spectacle (Chapter 7). Other elements, such as the private/public nature of the commission, the typology of patronage and audience, and the geographical location of each scheme are discussed and investigated, highlighting the hybrid and multi-layered nature of Rosso's practice.

In Chapter 2, I reconstruct the key episodes in the decorator's training, from 1911 to 1921. The typology of training that Rosso received and his artistic references are pointed out. To explore the latter aspect, I consider the contributions of Rosso's masters. In the following section, I shift the discussion from a biography-oriented approach towards the analysis of the contemporary debate around decoration and its relationship with the fine arts and architecture. The following two chapters consider Rosso's response to this debate.

In Chapter 3, I focus on Rosso's first commissions as an independent decorator, all undertaken between 1921 and 1927 in collaboration with the architect Marcello Piacentini (1881–1960). Thanks to the positive (sometimes enthusiastic) reception that these works received, Rosso was credited with helping to revive architectural decoration. I highlight and question the case for the artist's schemes as 'modern' and 'humorous'. While framing Rosso's early works within the context of Italian Art Deco, I also assess Rosso's use of humour, contrasting his visual narrative solutions with characteristics of the genre, to clarify audience expectations and verify the effectiveness of his use of the trope.

Chapter 4 investigates Rosso's contribution to Italian applied arts. A varied and multiform corpus emerges, showcasing the artist's adaptability, ability to establish contacts within different centres of artistic production (Rome, Milan, Venice, and Florence), and lasting contribution to the design of modern lacework, which, by the mid-

1930s, led to original experimentation in cross-genre decorative schemes. I will show how his practice, often hailed as an example by commentators of the time, illustrated both the limits and potential of artists' involvement in craft design. I also discuss the propagandistic policies of the regime as reflected in the decorative arts, arguing that the apparent freedom enjoyed by designers to experiment stylistically must be put into the context of a wider strategy, through which fascist cultural entrepreneurs aimed to regain creative primacy at world exhibitions and events.

Chapter 5 focuses on decorative schemes designed for private spaces, where the issue of self-representation becomes pivotal. The decoration of private houses and mansions, and of the headquarters of companies and corporations, had to convey the status of the patron and communicate a subtle, bespoke kind of propaganda. Schemes for domestic spaces show how Rosso manipulated traditional genres to meet his patrons' expectations, allowing a discourse on status, individuality, gender, and strategies of self-promotion to emerge. One way in which Rosso chose to represent the abstract concepts of power and control demanded by corporations was by relying on one genre in particular: the decorative map.

Chapter 6 considers decorative schemes designed for spaces devoted to the modern practices of consumerism and leisure. In shops and business premises, Rosso's decorations inevitably flirted with advertising. I will highlight his use of history and technology as visual elements, to convey ideas of prestige, credibility, and reliability. Rosso's natural light-hearted approach relished the atmosphere of escapism and exoticism often associated with spaces of entertainment and leisure. However, the tourism industry made decoration available to convey also nationalistic undertones. Rosso's decorative works in Libya show how strategies developed in the field of commercial and entertaining decoration could be used as vehicles for ideological propaganda, revealing the hegemonic nature of the regime's imperialist project. A process of adaptation was necessary. Yet, in some cases, Rosso did not carry it out completely, with results that clearly show how key decoration was in defining the identity of the spaces.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I consider how Rosso, from 1933 onwards, responded to the emergence of the fascist regime as a powerful and near-monopolistic patron of the arts. Rosso had to design images to suit spaces that served as arenas for spectacle

and the display of political power, areas used for ritual performances that the population was compelled to attend, and spaces used to indoctrinate the masses, for example through large propagandistic exhibitions. Rosso's output is analysed and assessed against this backdrop, viewing Fascism as an ideology that, rather than drawing on a single doctrine, had a fluid theoretical nature and relied heavily on the rhetorical means of communication and expression. Far from being a passive mirror of Fascism's changeable ideological discourse, Rosso's decorations actively participated in it. Original and innovative attempts, more conventional turns, and elements of dissonance are highlighted and put into context in this study, to account for Rosso's response to the extremely varied possibilities for visual creativity allowed by the politics of culture implemented by the regime.



## Chapter 1. Literature review

*'Within the University of 'Plastica Murale' [...] the teachers of Mural Painting will be Giulio Rosso, Marcello Nizzoli...'*<sup>1</sup>

*'...a certain Illustrative frivolity typical of the artist.'*<sup>2</sup>

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the literature on Giulio Rosso. I highlight the striking contrast between the high esteem in which his work was held during the interwar period and the oblivion that followed his relocation to Brazil (1946). As the first quotation demonstrates, Rosso was considered one of the best decorators of his generation, even included by futurist artist Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956) in his plan for a University of *Plastica Murale*.<sup>3</sup> Had this institute been founded, Rosso would have worked alongside well-known professionals of the calibre of Marcello Nizzoli (1887–1969), Bruno Munari (1907–1998), Gino Severini (1883–1966), Giuseppe Pagano, and Gio Ponti (1891–1979). Despite this, post-war scholars have rarely acknowledged Rosso's varied and extremely rich production, offering a rather fragmented and partial view, of which Maino's dismissive quotation is an example. A review of the post-war literature on the arts of the period is developed in the second part of the chapter, with particular attention paid to the (often unsatisfactory) ways in which their problematic relationship with the fascist regime and the question of 'decoration' have been assessed.

### 1.1 Giulio Rosso in the literature of the interwar period

Early comments on Giulio Rosso's work, mainly dating from around the mid-1920s, recall his beginnings and celebrate his success as a modern decorator. Mario Tinti (1885–1938), a prominent art critic and journalist of the period, was probably the first to praise a scheme by Rosso, when he reviewed the new Savoia Theatre in Florence (1922). Enthusiastic about his 'bizarre, colourful, fantastic, and funny' imagery, he

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<sup>1</sup> MACRO, Centro Ricerca Delle Arti Visive, Fondo Enrico Prampolini, fasc. 36, V, 8, H/1. Enrico Prampolini, *Promemoria per la Fondazione di una Università d'Arte Murale*, (ca. 1935).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Paola Maino, 'Casa Molle e lo "scimmietto azzurro"', *Forme Moderne*, 2 (2009), 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Plastica Murale* (Mural Plastic) was the futurists' answer to Mario Sironi's 1933 Manifesto della Pittura Murale, the founding document of Italian Muralism. Both Sironi and the futurists' proposals will be discussed in Chapter 7.

introduced Rosso to his readers as a 'true decorator'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, from the beginning of his career, Rosso was recognised as a creative expert in a specialised practice – decoration – that was clearly distinguished from the fine arts by its scopes: to participate in defining and enhancing an architectural space in accordance with the architect's guidelines and the patron's requirements.

In the early months of 1926, Pietro Scarpa, art critic for *Il Messaggero*, published an article entirely dedicated to Rosso, recounting his training and beginnings, and placing his practice firmly within the ambit of decoration. He highlighted both Rosso's ability to design decorative schemes to suit architectural features and his 'intellectual' approach. His 'fine taste' and 'subtle psychological investigation', his 'healthy verve of the humourist', not devoid of sarcasm, were praised as elements of distinction in a profession normally considered somewhat superficial.<sup>5</sup> One year later, it was the turn of writer Eugenio Giovannetti (1883–1951) to point out Rosso's confidence and pride in his own profession, as well as his humorous approach.<sup>6</sup> According to Giovannetti, Rosso quickly became a fashionable 'decorator'. A decorator – and not just a painter – because, as the commentator made clear by quoting Rosso himself, he was 'not interested in a painting to be hung on the wall, but rather in the interaction with architecture, following, at least in this, the example of the ancient masters.' The author very much appreciated Rosso's unconventionally spicy and naughty decorations.<sup>7</sup> Giovannetti's article, written in a register that matched the humorous content he detected in the decorator's output, celebrated Rosso's achievements while highlighting their singularity.

Indeed, the humorous character of Rosso's designs became a dominant leitmotiv in reviews of his works. Critics registered their own amusement and that of observers, pointing out the novelty of a decorative approach that, without undermining tradition, managed to play with it. The other theme that featured prominently in Rosso's reviews

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<sup>4</sup> Mario Tinti, *Il Teatro Savoia in Firenze*, (Milan: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1922), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (GNAM), Archivio Bioiconografico, fasc. 'Giulio Rosso'. Piero Scarpa, 'Giulio Rosso', *Il Messaggero*, 1926. The Archivio Bioiconografico was formed using documents gathered by the *Eco della Stampa*, a news agency which, since the foundation of the Gallery, has retrieved press clippings on themes related to modern and contemporary art.

<sup>6</sup> Giovannetti authored a few humorous novels, as well as translations of Latin classics and books of extreme erudition. He might have known Rosso's work through Giuseppe Zucca, for whom he published his *Sirene in Vacanza* in 1927.

<sup>7</sup> Eugenio Giovannetti, 'Il pittore dell'allegria', *Il Piccolo*, 20/04/1927, p. 9.

was the eclecticism of his sources and his ability to manage an extremely wide range of stylistic and thematic references, including foreign examples. In 1926, Rosso's submission to the national competition for the *Pensionato Artistico Nazionale* (see Chapter 6) caught the attention of many commentators. Among them, Prampolini observed that Rosso's proposal echoed ancient Pompeian mural painting while also reflecting the modern Art Deco style typical of artists working in Paris such as Eduardo Garcia Benito (1891–1981), Georges Lepape (1887–1971), and Jean-Emile Laboureur (1877–1943).<sup>8</sup> Influential intellectuals such as avant-garde supporter Corrado Pavolini (1898–1980), the director of the *Corriere della Sera* Carlo Tridenti and the art historian Michele Biancale (1878–1961) celebrated, respectively, Rosso's subtle verve, the mastery with which he reinterpreted sophisticated references through the insertion of grotesque and folkloric elements, and his virtuosic ability to blend ancient and modern styles.<sup>9</sup>

From 1928, *Domus* and *Casabella* (originally *La Casa Bella*) began to publish monthly issues, quickly establishing themselves as the most influential magazines of interior decoration in Italy, together with *Architettura e Arti Decorative* (later *Architettura*). These magazines closely followed Rosso's career until the mid-1930s. *Domus*, in particular, had a drawing by Rosso on the cover of its first issue, showing that Rosso's approach was perfectly in tune with that of the editor, Gio Ponti. Ponti, who was instrumental in the development of Rosso's decorative language before the 1930s, supported and constantly promoted his work, publishing decorative schemes, designs, and drawings: in its first year, eleven out of the twelve issues of *Domus* included works by Rosso. Asked to justify this 'obsession', Ponti delivered a powerful endorsement:

'Some readers, women to be precise (who knows why, poor Rosso!), benevolently blame *Domus* for writing about Rosso too often, constantly illustrating his works and citing his name. The responsibility is mine: I like Rosso a great deal. I find him most entertaining, he is the Italian decorator with the keenest invention, the most ornate imagination, the most pliable gift; and if I should wish to share this blame,

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<sup>8</sup> AGR, press clippings, Enrico Prampolini, 'Il Pensionato Artistico Nazionale', *L'Impero*, 12/02/1926.

<sup>9</sup> AGR, press clippings, Corrado Pavolini, 'Al Pensionato Artistico Nazionale', *Il Tevere*, 16/02/1926; Carlo Tridenti, 'Il Pensionato Artistico', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 11/02/1926; Michele Biancale, 'Il Pensionato Artistico', *Il Popolo di Roma*, 11/02/1926.



I am in excellent company with Roberto Papini, Marcello Piacentini, Antonio Maraini, all of them Rosso's admirers.'<sup>10</sup>

Rosso, concluded Ponti, was one of the few mural artists in Italy who had equally remarkable technical and imaginative skills. What Ponti meant by mural decoration was explained by the architect and urban planner Luigi Piccinato (1899–1983), who, in *Domus*, wrote that 'architecture rarely tolerates painting, it requires decoration', i.e. a design that enhances the architecture, without denying or disguising it.<sup>11</sup> Piccinato expressed the interest that modern architects took in this new approach to decoration, which was able to match their (moderate) attempts to update architecture by looking at foreign examples, without abandoning local traditions. Interestingly, the article was accompanied by two illustrations: one of a work by Rosso, whom Piccinato praised for his architectural sensibility, knowledge of techniques and attention to composition. The other was a scheme by the French artist Paul Vera (1882–1958), brother and collaborator of André (1881–1971), who is considered the theoretician of French Art Deco.<sup>12</sup> Piccinato noticed a 'commonality of character' between Vera and Rosso's schemes, and considered them examples of good decorative practice, where decorators had succeeded in renewing a decorative tradition by engaging with it with modern sensitivity.<sup>13</sup>

Good reviews of Rosso's achievements in the field of mural decoration appeared with consistency in the pages of specialised magazines in Italy and abroad during the first half of the 1930s. In an article published in *The Architectural Review*, Yoï Crosse Maraini (1877–1944) included Rosso – 'perhaps the most individual of the younger generation' – among 'the modern Italians' responsible for modernising the decorative arts.<sup>14</sup> The children's quarters in the Centurini Villa in Rome (discussed in Chapter 6) were praised by Katherine Morrison in the weekly British magazine *The Sphere*, as 'the gayest kind of modernist frescos'.<sup>15</sup> Pictures of Rosso's laceworks appeared in *The Sphere* in 1928, and in the *Christian Science Monitor* of Boston in 1929.<sup>16</sup> In the latter magazine, Yoï Maraini

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<sup>10</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Giulio Rosso Pensionato', *Domus*, 11 (1928), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Luigi Piccinato, 'Il muro da giardino', *Domus*, 5 (1928), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Agnès Virole (ed.), *Paul et André Vera: tradition et modernité*, (Saint-Germain-en-Laye: Hazan, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Piccinato (1928), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Yoï Maraini, 'The Modern Italians', *The Architectural Review*, 2 (1930), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Morrison, 'Modernism in the Nursery', *The Sphere*, 04/11/1930, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> AGR, press clippings, 'The Beauty of Venetian Point', *The Sphere*, 01/03/1928.

presented Rosso as ‘one of the most brilliant designers in Europe’, gifted with an ‘inexhaustible provision of ideas, which he carries out with a wit entirely Florentine in character’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, parallel to his activity as mural decorator, Rosso had also made a name for himself in the field of applied arts. From 1927, he exhibited regularly at the Monza Biennale of Decorative Arts (from 1930, ‘Triennale’; from 1933 held in Milan), engaging with different techniques (see Chapter 4).<sup>18</sup> These works, in particular his designs for the expensive laceworks produced by the Venice-based Jesurum Company, brought him wide popularity and critical acclaim. Heralded as the only authentic revelation of the 1927 Biennale, Rosso’s designs triggered, according to Roberto Papini (1883–1957), the ‘resurrection of the art of lace.’<sup>19</sup> ‘A young painter, among the best of our decorators, Giulio Rosso, gives to tablecloths, napkins and curtains a new grace’ wrote sculptor and director of the Venice Biennale Antonio Maraini (1886–1963).<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, new challenges arose with the emergence of the fascist regime as a powerful patron of the arts, stepping in when private commissions were shrinking, following the 1929 crash. Rosso must have sensed this shift: from the beginning of the 1930s, his art underwent a complex process of development, observed and recorded by contemporary commentators with mixed feelings. Leading critics, including Carlo A. Felice, Ugo Ojetti (1871–1946), and Margherita Sarfatti, praised Rosso’s schemes; Sarfatti wrote that he should be considered ‘the most cheerfully ingenious, the most sober, subtle and harmonious interior decorator of truly modern homes’.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Rosso’s participation in the 1933 fifth Triennale in Milan, which showcased the emerging Italian Muralism, projected him into the polemics that characterised that operation (designed to promote the emergence of a fascist public art). Roberto Papini, who loathed the apparent anarchy with which decorators and artists had taken over architecture, wrote that Rosso had ‘got lost in the fog of idiocy’.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the increasing

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<sup>17</sup> AGR, press clippings, Yoï Crosse Maraini, ‘The Modern Note in Lace’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19/04/1929.

<sup>18</sup> *Terza Mostra Internazionale delle Arti Decorative*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1927), pp. 23, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Alberto Neppi, ‘La moderna arte decorativa alla terza biennale di Monza’, *La Stirpe*, 7 (1927), 423–426; Roberto Papini, ‘Le arti a Monza nel 1927 – Gli Italiani’, *Emporium*, 391 (1927), 30.

<sup>20</sup> AGR, press clippings, Antonio Maraini, ‘La III Biennale di Monza. Merletti, Vetri, Ceramiche’, *Corriere della Sera*, 01/06/1927.

<sup>21</sup> Carlo A. Felice, ‘Pitture e Ambienti di Giulio Rosso’, *Domus*, 6 (1931), 47, 87; Ugo Ojetti, ‘L’Esposizione di Arte Decorative a Monza’, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 11/05/1930, p. 3; Margherita Sarfatti ‘Arte ed Industrie Oggi a Monza’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 11/05/1930, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Roberto Papini, ‘La V Triennale di Milano. Ispezione alle Arti’, *Emporium*, 468 (1933), 336. The mural as well as the possible reasons for Papini’s harsh comment will be discussed in Chapter 7.

interest demonstrated by fine artists in the decoration of public spaces, prompted a debate on the balance of power between them and architects. Although inquests were launched by magazines and congresses organised to clarify whether architecture should be considered the dominant art, or whether the arts could claim equal status (see Chapter 2), no position prevailed and decorators, like Rosso, adapted to different situations time after time. While mural decoration became the locus of polemics and tensions, Rosso kept producing successful designs for laceworks, textiles, and tapestries; in 1937, his Jesurum laceworks gained him a Golden Medal at the Paris World Exhibition.<sup>23</sup> Not by chance, the only published piece of writing by Rosso – ‘Recent history of Venetian lace’ – is a 1942 article for *Cellini*, the magazine issued by the *Ente Nazionale Artigianato e Piccole Industrie* (ENAPI), the national body for crafts and small industries.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the ambivalent reception of his fresco at the Triennale, from 1933 onwards Rosso was commissioned to provide a number of decorative schemes for architectural complexes built by the regime in Italy and the colonies. Although the second half of the 1930s was a period of frenzied activity for the decorator, he received little critical attention: his schemes were generally described as harmoniously defining the spaces they were designed for. With the beginning of World War II, public commissions suddenly dried up and Rosso turned to works that were more intimate and limited in scale: posters for the theatre, landscape drawings, and easel paintings. The reception of these works revealed a climate that was changing rapidly. Attilio Crespi, writing about Rosso’s 1941 exhibition of theatrical posters, judged the decorator’s career and approach quite harshly: his humorous eclecticism, constantly admired by critics of the previous decade, was now dismissed; his ability to absorb and reinterpret tendencies and stylistic fashions was viewed as an expression of moral laxity and a lack of intellectual commitment.<sup>25</sup> An anonymous review of his 1944 solo exhibition at the La Campana gallery in Rome is the last written word on Rosso before the (late) post-war writings examined in the following section. The ‘small paintings’ presented by Rosso could be interpreted, according to the commentator, as ‘a brave and sincere reaction to his own past, necessarily rhetorical and conventional’. Although the outcome was not

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<sup>23</sup> *Exposition de Paris 1937: Le Pavillon Italien*, (Paris: Chambre de Commerce Italien de Paris, 1937), p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Giulio Rosso, ‘Storia Recente del Merletto Veneziano’, *Cellini*, 6 (1942), 13–15.

<sup>25</sup> AGR, press clippings, Attilio Crespi, ‘I Disegni di Giulio Rosso’, *Radiocorriere*, 02/08/1941.

entirely satisfactory, Rosso was a 'personality from whom much is to be expected'.<sup>26</sup> The dramatic turn triggered by the disastrous consequences of the dictatorship prompted a climate of reaction to the conformist past. Rosso decided to break with it, and in 1946 relocated to Brazil. In Italy, his name and his work were neglected and then forgotten.

## 1.2 Giulio Rosso in post-war literature

Post-war scholarly literature has largely neglected Rosso's creative contribution. Before the 1990s, in the few studies that mentioned his work, the space normally occupied by the year of death in the brackets after his name often featured a disheartening question mark. These references generally used interwar sources without questioning them. Thus, the nuanced and rich arguments developed by critics such as Scarpa, Giovannetti, and Ponti became the substance of a stereotypical and extremely partial view that affected post-war perceptions of the decorator. One significant exception can be found in the studies of Rossana Bossaglia, among the leading experts on Italian decorative arts of the first half of the twentieth century. In her books on Italian Art Deco, she recognised Rosso as an independent and original interpreter of the style, suggesting a useful approach to assessing his beginnings.<sup>27</sup> In a later study, Bossaglia wrote that a significant component of Marcello Piacentini's 1920s 'state of grace' was played by the 'talent of Rosso, his lively and uninhibited hand, and unparalleled malice.'<sup>28</sup> However, no other scholars built on her intuitions. The catalogue of the exhibition *Il Déco in Italia*, curated by Fabio Benzi in 2004, only included Rosso's poster designs, although Paola Pallottino wrote a concise biography in which the content of Rosso's GNAM historical archive file was combined with fresh data on the decorator's contribution to illustration (Pallottino's area of expertise). A list was provided of the magazines Rosso collaborated with, and the books he illustrated, but, due to the nature of the entry, neither the typology of the illustrations nor his connections with particular editors were discussed.<sup>29</sup> There were brief references to Rosso in general studies of Italian twentieth century decorative arts. Irene de Guttry, in her survey of furniture design, included Rosso among those ironic and elegant designers, who, in her view, provided a contrast to the 'solemn

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<sup>26</sup> AGR, press clippings, V., 'Giulio Rosso alla "Campana"'.  
<sup>27</sup> Rossana Bossaglia, *Il "Déco" italiano – fisionomia dello stile 1925 in Italia*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 1975), p. 22.  
<sup>28</sup> Rossana Bossaglia, *L'Art Déco*, (Bari: Laterza, 1984), pp. 94–95.  
<sup>29</sup> Paola Pallottino, 'Giulio Rosso', in Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Il Déco in Italia*, (Rome: Electa, 2004), pp. 361–362.

and monumental clique represented by Sironi, Prini, Morbiducci and Ferrazzi'.<sup>30</sup> The questionable nature of this stark dichotomy notwithstanding, de Guttry re-established Rosso's presence in the group of artists with whom he collaborated and used to be associated, highlighting, at the same time, the role of Marcello Piacentini in the development of his career between 1921 and 1925. However, Rosso continued to be mislabelled as a 'light' decorator, confirming a persistent cliché, even when the context called for a more careful consideration.

The 'typical illustrative frivolity' observed by Maria Paola Maino in Rosso's murals for the Molle House in Rome, for example, is a striking example of a stereotypical interpretative scheme applied uncritically.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, rather than focusing on the alleged contrast between Rosso's convivial and picturesque scenes and the severe 'Roman' character of the space designed by architect Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo (1890–1966), research informed by the principles of decoration should consider how the scheme complements the architecture. Maino's argument is evidently biased against Rosso because a comprehensive knowledge of his career was lacking. Rosso and Morpurgo had worked together on at least three other occasions, with evident reciprocal confidence and artistic entente. Morpurgo, who coordinated all of the decorative interventions, must have approved the wall decorations without believing that they would clash with his furniture, or, alternatively, appreciating the clash.

Maria Cristina Tonelli Michail and Lucia Mannini indirectly refer to Rosso as applied arts designer in two articles published in 1999 and 2006 in *Artista*, focusing on Roberto Papini and the glass manufacturer Quentin respectively. Tonelli Michail's article reconstructs the collaboration between Papini and the Jesurum textile company of Venice, pointing out Rosso's role as a designer, the success of the experiment, and how often he was held up as an example of a modern decorator actively engaged in the renaissance of Italian traditional handcrafts.<sup>32</sup> Mannini mentions the collaboration between Rosso and the Quentin glassmakers of Florence, this time for the Venice Biennale of 1928, repeating

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<sup>30</sup> Irene de Guttry, 'Mobili esemplari – esemplari di mobili', in Marisa Vescovo and Netta Vespignani (eds.), *Le Capitali d'Italia, Torino – Roma, arti, produzione e spettacolo*, (Milan: Electa, 1997), p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> Maino (2009), 28.

<sup>32</sup> Maria Cristina Tonelli Michail, 'Progetti inusuali', *Artista*, (1999), 164–173.

the stereotype of the witty and light-hearted decorator without adding further insights.<sup>33</sup>

Although Rosso worked for many leading figures in Italian modern architecture, there are few references to him in the various monographs about their work. The collaboration between architects and decorators, as well as the relationship between the design of a space and its ornamentation, still seem affected by a modernist stigma. More revealing are the published studies that focus on buildings, rather than architects. Scholars have recognised the particular significance, in the history of Italian modern architecture, of complexes that include works by Rosso, such as the Foro Mussolini (1927–1936), the Città Universitaria (1933–34) and the E42, the district meant to host the 1942 World Exhibition (1937–1942), in Rome. In these studies, however, the status of decoration is diminished; discussions of Rosso's schemes are often characterised by a certain analytical superficiality.

The first such study, carried out in 1985, focused on the La Sapienza university campus in Rome. The investigations privileged an analysis of the buildings and the mural by Mario Sironi in the lecture hall. A short entry by Daniela De Dominicis assessed Rosso's contribution (analysed in Chapter 7): the author could not help but notice that his classically-inspired work was very different from the fresh and humorous compositions generally associated with the decorator.<sup>34</sup> However, this observation was not developed, either on that occasion, or one year later, when the same team, led by Simonetta Lux, delivered important research on the E42. These investigations, carried out using the extensive documentation kept in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), considered political, urban, architectural, artistic and decorative aspects of the project. Lux, summing up the assessments, argued that the decorative interventions for the E42 expressed the 'impossibility of being artists'.<sup>35</sup> Due to the monumental, Roman turn of the regime's dominant narrative, triggered by the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, architects, painters, sculptors, and designers involved in public art found it increasingly

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<sup>33</sup> Lucia Mannini, 'Vetrare da esposizione', *Artista*, (2006), 118–127.

<sup>34</sup> Daniela De Dominicis, 'Giulio Rosso', in Simonetta Lux (ed.), *1935–1985: La Sapienza nella città universitaria*, (Rome: Multigrafica, 1985), p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, Enrico Guidoni and Simonetta Lux, *E42: Utopia e Scenario del Regime*, (Venice: Marsilio, 1987), p. 142.

difficult to take advantage of the promised 'aesthetic pluralism'.<sup>36</sup> Building on this premise, Antonella Greco, in her entry on Rosso's mosaics panels for the Office Building (1939; see Chapter 7), dispatched them as a mere imitation of earlier works designed for the Foro Mussolini. Greco argues that this lack of innovation reflects the artist's disappointment at not having been commissioned to produce a work appropriate to his skills, citing a letter by Rosso as evidence.<sup>37</sup> However, the letter in question was written by Rosso at the beginning of the war, two years after he designed the mosaics, when he was in a rather different situation. In addition, questions regarding the recurrence of particular themes, their connection with ideology, the artists' interpretations, and the commissioners' requests were all neglected.

Greco also investigated the Foro Mussolini, with similar results.<sup>38</sup> A well-documented reconstruction of the phases of planning and designing the sports complex is matched by a vaguer assessment of the decorative schemes. Her analysis of the Piazzale dell'Impero (1936–37), the vast thoroughfare at the entrance of the Foro with twenty-five mosaics panels by Gino Severini, Achille Capizzano (1907–1951), Angelo Canevari (1901–1955), and Rosso provides an example of this pattern. Greco avoids attributing the various panels, making it impossible to appreciate the diversity of the artists' approaches, or their individual relationships with the architect. Although she recognizes that Rosso was among the most active artists in the complex, she avoids any critical assessment. In 1998, when Federica Pirani curated an exhibition of Gino Severini's original drawings for the Foro Mussolini, the times seemed ripe for new research on the mosaics. Yet, aside for some references to possible iconographic sources, Pirani's analysis was inconclusive.<sup>39</sup> The influence of early Renaissance masters during the years between the two world wars is widely recognised.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore surprising that other unorthodox forms of expression, such as the mixture of modern and classical sources of inspiration, the recourse to tricks and solutions drawn from contemporary visual

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<sup>36</sup> The definition has been introduced by Susan Marla Stone in her *The Patron State*, (Princeton: University Press, 1998). I will discuss this in Chapter 7.

<sup>37</sup> Antonella Greco, 'Gino Severini, Giulio Rosso, Giovanni Guerrini', in Calvesi (1987), p. 313.

<sup>38</sup> Antonella Greco and Salvatore Santuccio, *Il Foro Italico*, (Rome: Multigrafica, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Federica Pirani, '1937: i mosaici dell'Impero', in Federica Pirani and Simonetta Tozzi (eds.), *Severini al Foro Italico*, (Rome: Palombi, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Maria Mimita Lamberti and Maurizio Fagiolo Dell'Arco (ed), *Piero della Francesca e il Novecento: prospettiva, spazio, luce, geometria, pittura murale, tonalismo 1920–1938*, (Venice: Marsilio, 1991).

culture, and the use of Roman archaeological imagery (all elements discussed in Chapter 7) were completely overlooked.

These monographic studies of architectural complexes built by the fascist regime provided useful sources of information about Rosso's more institutional and monumental works. However, instead of prompting a reconsideration of the prevailing view, which confined the artist within one short Art Deco season, these accounts treated his later phase with suspicion and prejudice. Imitation, repetition, and inadequacy were the most frequent descriptions of his output. Yet, his constant involvement in the most important architectural enterprises of the regime, his collaboration with respected architects, and his central position at the Foro Mussolini, invite critical analyses based on different, less biased premises, both of his works and of the documentary sources.

More attention has been paid to Giulio Rosso during the last few years: two studies, published in 2010 and 2012, focused exclusively on Rosso's output, providing a broader picture of the development of his career. The first complete account of Rosso's career was published by Anna Maria Damigella in 2010 in *Forme Moderne*.<sup>41</sup> Damigella succeeded in reconstructing a chronology of the artist's output. In addition, she managed to contact Giulio Rosso's son Edoardo in Brazil, who sent her fresh information and materials about his father's activity in the South American country between 1946 and 1976. However, Damigella was more interested in presenting Rosso's oeuvre than with critically assessing his creative experience. The variety and richness of the artist's output, as well as his strategic connections to many of the main figures of the *ventennio* cultural context are eventually outlined. Yet, Damigella's narration is essentially descriptive. She fails to question any past or present judgements, and avoids expressing her own critical viewpoint. The strategies Rosso adopted to complete different kinds of commission (public, private, commercial, and entertainment), the solutions and models he adapted to different techniques, and his developing responses to patrons, architects and debates still require investigation.

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<sup>41</sup> Anna Maria Damigella, 'Giulio Rosso', *Forme Moderne*, 5 (2010), 8–47.



Stefano Franzo's approach is more critical.<sup>42</sup> His study focuses on the decorator's activity as a lacework and mosaics designer in Rome and Venice, pointing out Rosso's ability to use models and solutions derived from many different traditions, while adapting styles and choosing subjects to suit specific commissions. In addition, through a number of references to the debate in contemporary magazines, Franzo frames the decorator's contribution within a contemporary debate involving both architectural decoration and the applied arts. Franzo provides references to magazines, exhibition catalogues, and other publications edited by leading intellectuals of the day, which always mention Rosso's work, and his key role as a representative of the decorative arts in the Fascist Union of Artists and at the Milan Triennale.<sup>43</sup> Franzo's paper is also very useful from a methodological point of view. It demonstrates one way of analysing a critically unexplored subject by linking it firmly to the context in which it developed, rather than relating it to later comments that reveal a partial understanding and vague categories.

### 1.3 A controversial topic: the arts in Italy 1918–1941

Chronologically caught between two tragic conflicts, politically almost entirely dominated by the figure of Benito Mussolini and his fascist regime (1922–1943), the interwar period has long been considered an isolated and disturbing parenthesis in Italian history.<sup>44</sup> In post-World War II Italy, the *ventennio* was promptly compartmentalised and hidden away. Only from the 1980s onwards were attempts made to reinstate the period in twentieth century historical narrative, at varying speeds in different disciplines. Art History was certainly one of the last fields to make this change. As Simonetta Lux warned:

'The rather difficult study of Italian art and architecture between the wars is in part the study of a period during which culture was charged by an unprecedented ideological pressure. Nevertheless, it is above all the study of a sort of open workshop, within which the needs of a powerful cultural renewal were

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<sup>42</sup> Stefano Franzo, 'Forme "squisitamente stilistiche" e moderne. Per l'attività di Giulio Rosso mosaicista e decoratore tra l'Italia centrale e le Tre Venezie', in Claudia Caramanna, Novella Macola and Laura Nazzi (eds.), *Citazioni, modelli e tipologie nella produzione dell'opera d'arte*, (Padova: Clup, 2012), pp. 129–138.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>44</sup> Benedetto Croce, 'Discorso all'Assemblea Costituente, 24 Luglio 1947', in *Scritti e discorsi politici (1943–1947)*, (Bari: Laterza, 1963), p. 408.

intermingled with striking contradictions due to the juxtaposition, mixture, and critical integration with the structures of political reaction.<sup>45</sup>

This integration proved to be extremely difficult to assess. Among the cultural policies of the authoritarian regimes that dominated the interwar period in Europe, fascist Italy presents an apparent paradox: no one style, school, or monument epitomises the patronage practices of the fascist state. The regime, needing the cooperation of artists, allowed them to work in a climate of aesthetic pluralism. Italian artists and architects reciprocated by accepting the regime's patronage and by offering almost unanimous consent.<sup>46</sup> This conformist allegiance led to a long post-war censorship of the architecture, arts, and culture produced during the *ventennio*. Even distinguishing between the different phases of that era proved difficult. Although the cultural policies of the regime began to affect the arts at the start of the 1930s, tendencies that developed during the 1920s, within the context of the European 'Return to order', were retrospectively associated with the cult of order, discipline, and hierarchy promoted by Mussolini.<sup>47</sup>

The association between authoritarian regimes and cultural trends dominated by a nostalgic approach to the past, seemed natural to most post-war scholars. The fact that there were many different return(s) to order, some supporting a rational and/or spiritual new aesthetic that pointed towards abstraction, and others a neo-classical figurative revival, seemed irrelevant. As Mark Antliff has observed, a 'post-war complacency' associated the condemnation of totalitarian systems with the condemnation of their supposed artistic expressions.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, some of the most advanced manifestations of modernism in the arts were linked with anti-fascist contexts, minimising, once again, the contradictions inherent in the Italian situation. Fascism was inspired by Futurism, especially in its heydays as a revolutionary movement.<sup>49</sup> Once Mussolini seized the power, a second generation of Futurists proposed Marinetti's movement as the official language of a fascist state art, competing with the painters of

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<sup>45</sup> Simonetta Lux (ed.), *Avanguardia, Tradizione, Ideologia*, (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1990), p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Ben Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities. Italy 1922–1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) pp. 9–10.

<sup>47</sup> The formula allegedly derived from *Rappel à l'ordre*, the title of a Jean Cocteau's essay (Paris: Broché, 1926).

<sup>48</sup> Mark Antliff, 'Fascism, Modernism, Modernity', *The Art Bulletin*, 1 (2002), 148.

<sup>49</sup> Enrico Crispolti, 'Appunti sui materiali riguardanti i rapporti tra Futurismo e Fascismo', in Berthold Hinz, Zeno Birolli and Enrico Crispolti, *Arte e Fascismo in Italia e Germania*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), pp. 7–67.

the Novecento and many others, including abstract, expressionist, and realist artists. None was chosen, and all of these styles were allowed to contribute to the 'revolution'.

How did Italian post-war scholarship react to such a disconcerting scenario? Operating within two distinct theoretical frameworks, art historians reached conclusions that still affect the study of arts during the interwar period. Those aligned with philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) rejected the very idea that art could be affected by external contingencies. Croce's Idealist aesthetic, rooted in Konrad Fiedler's Pure Visibility theory, considered works of art to be the material expression of an untouched and untainted inspiration. The most striking example of this approach was a large exhibition focusing on the period 1915–35, curated by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti in Florence in 1967: a display of 'pure art', devoid of any possible socio-political connotations.<sup>50</sup> The connections between artists and the regime were hidden away, wrapped in a veil of shame.

On the other hand, post-war Marxist scholarship saw Fascism as a pervasive superstructure that, in its attempt to control Italian society, managed to integrate most intellectuals, as Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) argued during the captivity into which he was forced by the regime.<sup>51</sup> This integration, an index of moral corruption, inevitably affected the artists' creativity; their output had to be rejected. Critical attention and recognition were granted only to those whose attitude or oeuvre could be interpreted as resistance/opposition. Renato Guttuso (1911–1987) and the artists of the Corrente group, of the Scuola Romana, the abstract artists of the Como Group and those supported by the Il Milione gallery in Milan, became the heroes of a cultural resistance that anticipated and matched that fought against the Nazi-fascist forces during the last years of the war. A 'mystification', as recently defined by Fabio Benzi, and yet one that proved very lasting.<sup>52</sup> Thus, post-war critical views considered the impact of Fascism on an artist's creativity either as irrelevant, or as affecting only the wicked, conformists, second-rate artists, and purveyors of a presumed low and popular culture. The

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<sup>50</sup> Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti (ed.), *Arte Moderna in Italia, 1915–1935*, (Florence: Marchi e Bertelli, 1967).

<sup>51</sup> Gramsci's reflections on the role of the intellectuals have been gathered in *I Quaderni, vol. 1 Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*, first edn Turin: Einaudi, 1949, (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> Fabio Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), pp. 247–248.

possibility that, within the wide-ranging propagandistic environment of Fascism, a significant work of art could be created was rejected systematically and firmly.

Starting in the 1980s, new interest in the interwar period began to emerge. In studies exploring the culture of the time, architectural historians were the first scholars to challenge both the Crocean and the Marxist approaches. The reality of a patronage system that was able to sponsor both the canonical masterpiece of Italian Rationalism – Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como (1932) – and works of clumsy and overcharged historicism, such as Adolfo Coppedè's Casa del Fascio di Lastra a Signa (1928), gave rise to an approach that acknowledged the context, valuing its impact on a case-by-case basis.<sup>53</sup> Within this discipline, the interest that foreign scholars, unaffected by the dominant Italian theoretical frameworks, took in Italy's *ventennio* built environment was also pivotal. Among these scholars, Diane Ghirardo has, since 1980, denounced as 'ultimately flawed' attempts to 'airbrush Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio of the taint of Fascism but to damn virtually everything by Piacentini as fascist'.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, Carlo Fabrizio Carli recognised that Italian architects during the *ventennio* gained ground against their European counterparts, introducing and developing their own version of modernism.<sup>55</sup> Such lines of enquiry flourished in the 1990s, with contributions from Giorgio Ciucci, in Italy, and scholars based in the United States.<sup>56</sup> In addition, analysis that followed a strict stylistically informed modernist perspective also remained in vogue. Carlo Cresti, for example, argues that the period was dominated by a fragile compromise with academic traditions; only a few exceptional works deserve to be considered.<sup>57</sup> Carlo Melograni, as late as 2008, highlighted the way in which Italian architecture, in its most advanced expressions, was able to contribute to the development of a modern, European language, 'Fascism notwithstanding'.<sup>58</sup> The legacy of Fascism is still controversial.

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<sup>53</sup> Terry Kirk writes of 'oscillation between abstract Rationalism and emblematic figuration' in *The Architecture of Modern Italy: Visions of Utopia, 1900–Present*, 2 vols., (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), II, p. 102.

<sup>54</sup> Diane Ghirardo, 'Italian architects and fascist politics: an evaluation of Rationalists' Role in Regime Building', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 5 (1980), 109–110.

<sup>55</sup> Carlo Fabrizio Carli, *Architettura e Fascismo*, (Rome: Giovanni Volpe Editore, 1980).

<sup>56</sup> See Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo: architettura e città, 1922–1944*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1989); Richard A. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian architecture, 1890–1940*, (Cambridge: MIT, 1991); Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist modernism: aesthetics, politics, and the avant-garde*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> Carlo Cresti, *Architettura e Fascismo*, (Florence: Vallecchi, 1986), pp. 7–8.

<sup>58</sup> Carlo Melograni, *Architettura Italiana sotto il fascismo*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008).

However, these studies encouraged parallel challenges to the dominant view that ‘the condition of Italian art [of the *ventennio* was] that of silence, abyss, void, and nihilism.’<sup>59</sup> As Alessandro Masi has argued, within the wider context of fascist patronage, it is necessary to distinguish artists ‘operating a conventional and flat conformism [...] from those that, within the framework of the propaganda, were able to formulate more complex and articulated proposals’.<sup>60</sup> The exhibition ‘*L’Uomo della Provvidenza*’, curated by Giorgio di Genova in 1997, aimed to highlight the limits of the dominant critical frameworks showing a wide range of works focusing on the iconography of the *Duce*, some of which are of undoubted interest and significance.<sup>61</sup> Fabio Benzi, in his *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*, aims to demolish the stereotypes and conventional interpretative models inherited from post-war scholarship. Building on studies developed in sister-disciplines and abroad, as well as investigations carried out during recent decades, the author highlights connections, contacts, and influences, reconstructing an extremely vibrant artistic debate.<sup>62</sup> Prejudices and persistent mystification are exposed and contested using documented evidence; artistic trajectories are contextualised and woven together with the social and political context. However, rather than letting new actors and experiences emerge, Benzi’s account reconsiders a narrative whose protagonists have already been established. To answer the question that has constantly haunted the literature – ‘how is it possible to develop free and quality artistic expression under a dictatorship?’ – he argues that is necessary to understand the structures that the regime devised to control and enlist artists, as well as the nature of Fascism itself and its relationship with visual culture.<sup>63</sup>

While the question of the interpretation of Italian Fascism is still debated, historians interested in the structures the regime set up to organize and control culture at various levels give reliable and effective accounts.<sup>64</sup> Susan Marla Stone’s *The Patron State* (1998)

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<sup>59</sup> Germano Celant, ‘Uno mosaico d’identità’, in Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant (eds.), *Arte Italiana. Presenze 1900–1945*, (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> Alessandro Masi, *Storia dell’arte italiana 1909–1942*, (Città di Castello: Edimond, 2007), p. 98. On the specific problem of the relationship between the arts and the state see: Alessandro Masi, *Un’Arte per lo Stato. Dalla nascita della Metafisica alla Legge del 2%*, (Napoli, Marotta, 1991).

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Di Genova, (ed.), *L’Uomo della Provvidenza, Iconografica del Duce 1923–1945*, (Bologna: Bora, 1997).

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed analysis of the literature on the movements, tendencies, schools and personalities that emerged during the *ventennio* see Benzi (2013), ‘Introduction’, pp. 11–19.

<sup>63</sup> Benzi (2013), pp. 13, 229–234.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of possible interpretations of Fascism, including one that informs this research, see Chapter 7.

and Monica Cioli's *Il Fascismo e la sua arte* (2001), describe fascist cultural policies in a systematic way, offering different points of view on their objectives and expectations (although agreeing on their effectiveness). Stone addresses the ways in which the regime pursued and co-opted cultural producers as well as audiences.<sup>65</sup> For her, the relationship between artist and regime was based on a system of mutual benefit: the dictatorship provided artists with official commissions and a livelihood with reduced aesthetic constraints; in exchange, artists offered their creativity and expertise for propaganda. The level of consent towards this policy is measured by the author in terms of the massive number of artists who joined the professional unions and organisations set up by the regime to control the process. According to Monica Cioli, the structures devised to control the arts must be considered a necessary stage in the attempt to build up a totalitarian state.<sup>66</sup> This perspective chimes with the interpretation of Fascism as a totalitarian dictatorship that used the arts as a means of self-definition and self-representation, as formulated by historian Emilio Gentile.<sup>67</sup>

As well as organizing a bureaucratic structure, Fascism also operated as a producer/user/consumer of extremely pervasive and ubiquitous slogans, themes, ideas, and concepts. Laura Malvano in her work *Fascismo e Politica dell'Immagine*, focuses on the mythographic themes introduced through Fascism's experiments with mass culture and low/high artistic discourses.<sup>68</sup> It is a necessary premise for Malvano that artists collaborated in the process of producing consumable images, participating in the construction of Fascism's identity and the visual and material culture experienced by a wide audience. More recently, the participation of the arts in building the cult of Mussolini has been analysed without prejudices or preconceptions by Giuliana Pieri.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the question is no longer 'if and how it was possible?', but rather, 'what was the result?' As Penelope Curtis has pointed out in her book on Italian sculpture during the fascist *ventennio*, 'I have spent time establishing the chronology to establish this as a point of departure. It is not contested that [Italian sculptors] took such commissions, but

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<sup>65</sup> Stone (1998).

<sup>66</sup> Monica Cioli, *Il Fascismo e la sua arte. Dottrina e istituzioni tra futurismo e Novecento*, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2001), p. 210.

<sup>67</sup> Emilio Gentile, 'La Storia d'Italia tra il 1900 e il 1940', in Guy Cogeval and Beatrice Avanzi (eds.), *Una dolce vita? Dal Liberty al design italiano 1900–1940*, (Ginevra-Milan: Skira, 2015), pp. 26–27.

<sup>68</sup> Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e Politica dell'Immagine*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988), p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> Giuliana Pieri, 'Portraits of the Duce', in Stephen Gundle, Christopher Duggan and Giuliana Pieri (eds.), *The Cult of the Duce. Mussolini and the Italians*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 161–177.

it is rarely articulated. If, however, we accept it as a matter of fact, can we move on to ask what might this mean for their sculpture?’<sup>70</sup> The consideration of the larger context, with its key protagonists and phases, must be accompanied by a careful analysis of the specific circumstances, situation, and experiences of each actor/phenomenon being investigated.<sup>71</sup>

#### 1.4 The decorative side of the *ventennio*

Within the troubled academic speciality of Italian arts during the interwar period, ‘decoration’ has not been given much consideration, although artists and critics of the time were well aware of the concept and its implications, as argued in Chapter 2. On the one hand, the modernist anathema against ornament, although rarely religiously implemented, did strike a chord among militant critics, who for long time considered decoration a superficial, disengaged, and superfluous practice, resulting in ‘secular ostracism’.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, although many practitioners of the period aimed to achieve unity by drawing on the decorative as a dimension in which different creative practices could find a space for synthesis, art historians have preferred to fragment their approach to visual culture.<sup>73</sup> They reflect what E. H. Gombrich referred to as ‘the neurotic compulsion of high art to divorce itself from the decorative’.<sup>74</sup> Benzi, for instance, excludes the decorative arts from his book on the arts in Italy between the two wars, referring to his previous *Liberty e Déco. Mezzo Secolo di stile in Italia*, which synthesizes and combines the author’s studies of Italian Art Nouveau and Art Deco. Yet,

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<sup>70</sup> Penelope Curtis (ed.), *Scultura Lingua Morta: Sculpture in Fascist Italy*, (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2003), p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> Emily Braun has adopted this line of enquiry in her monograph dedicated to Mario Sironi. Refusing to lose sight of the fact that ‘Sironi was a Fascist of unquestionable faith’, she reveals the complex relationship between modernism and Fascism in Italy, and the way in which artistic and political choices can inform each other. Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Giuliana Altea, *Il Fantasma del decorativo*, (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2013), p. 10.

<sup>73</sup> Foreign scholars have recognised the centrality of the concept of decoration in the artistic debates of the period. In particular, research on French art between the 1890s and 1940s has highlighted the importance of such notion in understanding the Nabis, Henri Matisse, Ferdinand Leger and the French *artistes décorateurs* [see: Nicholas Watkins, ‘The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic’, in Gloria Groom (ed.), *Beyond the Easel*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 1–28]. Recently, Sacha Llewellyn has emphasised the importance of considering how many British artists were trained in the principles of decorative painting’s ‘aesthetic philosophy’. Sacha Llewellyn (ed.), *Winifred Knights (1899–1947)*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2016), pp. 10, 63–65.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in: Watkins (2001), p. 21.

rather than problematizing the question of decoration, Benzi is chiefly preoccupied with defining the characteristics of individual styles, and their diverse range of variations.<sup>75</sup>

Even when exhibitions were specifically organised to broaden the focus from fine arts to the material and visual culture of the period, a sectarian, hyper-specialised approach persisted, jeopardizing efforts to highlight cross-disciplinary aspects. For instance, the team of curators behind the exhibition *Gli Anni Trenta*, which opened in Milan in 1982, aimed at ‘correlating and putting together all the aspects of the artistic/cultural life’ of 1930s Italy.<sup>76</sup> In response to the critical approaches described above, the 1982 exhibition proposed an alternative: the arts were assessed as responding to contextual social and political situations, although Fascism was considered a passive agent. ‘The regime – the curator Renato Barilli concluded – did not obstruct a cultural development that would have not been any different if our country had remained a representative democracy’.<sup>77</sup> Unsatisfactory as such an argument was and is, it allowed the case to be made that, during the 1930s, works of value had been produced that deserved attention. Above all, a number of previously neglected genres were included: cinema, photography, illustration, graphic and industrial design, and the decorative arts, which complemented the fine arts and architectural images. Of particular interest were sections dedicated to the Milanese Triennale exhibitions of decorative and industrial arts and architecture, and the *protodesign*, both curated by Anty Pansera.<sup>78</sup> Yet, the different artistic branches remained rigidly separated, refusing to allow decoration to offer an alternative and original cross-disciplinary perspective.

Two recent exhibitions organised in quick succession – *Anni '30. Arti in Italia oltre il Fascismo* in Florence (September 2012–January 2013) and *Novecento. Arte e Vita in Italia tra le Due Guerre* in Forlì (February–June 2013) – featured the applied arts and cartoons and sketches of works of architectural decoration.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, typological

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<sup>75</sup> Fabio Benzi, *Liberty e Déco. Mezzo Secolo di stile in Italia*, (Milan: Motta, 2007). Benzi built on pivotal studies by Rossana Bossaglia (see footnotes 27, 28) and Giulia Veronesi, *Stile 1925: ascesa e caduta delle Arts Déco*, (Florence: Vallecchi, 1966).

<sup>76</sup> Renato Barilli, ‘Gli Anni Trenta. Radiografia di un successo’, in Renato Barilli et al. (eds.), *Gli Anni Trenta. Arte e cultura in Italia*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1983), p. XIII.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. XVI.

<sup>78</sup> Pansera introduces the definition of ‘protodesign’ to define the output of those who designed products for potential mass production, which the Italian industrial system could not provide. Anty Pansera, ‘Protodesign’, in Barilli (1983), p. 325.

<sup>79</sup> Antonello Negri (ed.), *Anni '30, Arti in Italia oltre il Fascismo*, (Florence: Giunti, 2012); Fernando Mazzocca (ed.), *Novecento. Arte e Vita in Italia tra le due Guerre*, (Milan: Silvana, 2013).



and thematic differences segmented the topics and problems debated at the time.<sup>80</sup> A promising engagement with the arts as part of the 'life' of the country was attempted by Fernando Mazzocca, curator of the Forlì show. Thanks to an approach that considered the whole of the interwar period (as opposed to the Florence show, which focused, once again, on the 1930s), this analysis tackled long-avoided questions, including artists' responses to the shift from a post-war context still dominated by a liberal, bourgeois, individualistic ideology to one dominated by the myth of the state, the permanent revolution, and the authoritarian populism imposed by Fascism. As Nicoletta Colombo has observed, this change became evident in the emergence of a new dialogue between the (fine) arts and architecture, the revival of crafts and, crucially, a focus on 'new horizons of decoration.'<sup>81</sup> Although Colombo's essay undoubtedly represents a point of departure, architectural decoration was kept to a specific section of the display, distinct from both fine and, above all, decorative arts. In addition, the exhibited works dated from the 1930s, showing the range of expressions encompassed by Italian Muralism, a very specific phenomenon that developed in 1933, involving two manifestos, an exhibition organised as a showcase, and endless polemics.<sup>82</sup> If the aim was to discuss how the practice of architectural decoration, constantly carried out, responded to the anxieties of post-World War I 'modernity', the result is disappointing. Indeed, when artists asked for walls they engaged with a practice that had been kept alive by legions of 'decorators'. Decorators, like Giulio Rosso, who, during the 1920s, had made the design of ornaments for objects and architecture their profession, and that once again were completely neglected.

Trained decorators have attracted the attention of a specific and specialised group of experts because of their involvement in the design of objects.<sup>83</sup> What is often missed is

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<sup>80</sup> This is especially true for the Florence show curated by Antonello Negri. Having as its reference point Raghianti's 1967 exhibition, it focused on first establishing the aesthetic values of the works. Nevertheless, as stated in the introduction, 'the weight of history and ideology is expressed through significant fragments in the spaces dedicated to public art'. Negri (2012), p. 17.

<sup>81</sup> Nicoletta Colombo, "'Pittori di Muraglie". Voci e vicende della pittura murale negli Anni Venti e Trenta', in Mazzocca (2013), pp. 59–67.

<sup>82</sup> On Italian Muralism see Vittorio Fagone, Giovanna Ginex and Tulliola Sparagni (eds.), *Muri ai Pittori. Pittura murale e decorazione in Italia 1930–1950*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999). Although 'decoration' was mentioned in its title, the curators of this exhibition highlighted connections between exhibited works and easel paintings, while neglecting their engagement with the decorative arts.

<sup>83</sup> In this field, Irene de Guttry and Maria Paola Maino have curated exhibitions and contributed studies of furniture, ceramics, and glassware, always focusing on a single craft, the artefacts and main representatives. Irene de Guttry and Maria Paola Maino, *Il mobile liberty italiano*, (Bari: Laterza, 1983); *Il mobile déco italiano: 1920–1940*, (Bari: Laterza, 1988); *Intrecci: il mobile in vimini italiano*, (Venice: Il

that, in Rosso's time, decoration was applied to the surfaces of buildings and to objects alike. Although some decorators specialised in one technique rather than another, their practice allowed them to cross boundaries between fields. Ultimately, fine artists became more and more interested in decoration as a potential new dimension to enhance artistic research. According to Mario Sironi, 'mural painting, from the fresco to the tapestry, from the floor to the stained-glass and mosaics, is decoration'.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, decoration represents a neglected field of research because of its difficult cross-disciplinary nature, obscure academic training, and failure to conform to the canons of 'free' creativity. Even exhibitions that focus on the decorative arts fail to do justice to this complex field. This was the case with *Una dolce vita?*, a recent exhibition devoted to early twentieth century Italian decorative arts organised by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.<sup>85</sup>

Such an auspicious occasion would have been an ideal opportunity to reassess the theme. Instead, old boundaries and categories were re-affirmed. The approach used to display the objects highlighted their dependency on styles developed in the fine arts and architecture (Futurism, Novecento, Pittura Metafisica, and Rationalism). Thus, any chance of understanding a practice whose principles allowed a fluid, undogmatic approach to the notion of style was compromised a priori. Potential questions about the shifting status (aesthetic vs functional) and characterisation of these items (unique object vs standardised type), as well as issues involving the ideologically charged representation of class, gender, identity, power, nationalism, propaganda, and the artefacts' role in defining a modern environment, were neglected by this richly documented, visually enchanting, and yet critically disappointing show.

Furthermore, the sole curatorial stance, which views the decorative arts as 'the only field where a real and authentic free-will survived' within the fascist authoritarian regime is highly questionable.<sup>86</sup> If by 'free will' Cogeval means a space free for formal experimentation, it is, by now, undeniable that the cultural impresarios in charge of the fascist art policies never aspired to stamp fasces or she-wolves on every available

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cardo, 1995); *Artisti e fornaci: la felice stagione della ceramica a Roma e nel Lazio (1880–1930)*, (Rome: De Luca, 2003).

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in: Maria Paola Maino, 'Il gusto Novecento', in Mazzocca (2013), p. 112.

<sup>85</sup> Guy Cogeval and Beatrice Avanzi (eds.), *Una dolce vita? Dal Liberty al design italiano 1900–1940*, (Ginevra-Milan: Skira, 2015).

<sup>86</sup> Cogeval (2015), p. 16.

surface. However, this fact should neither obscure proven connections between the regime and the 'joyous and light hearted' designers who contributed to the post-war renaissance of Italian design, nor prohibit a more challenging assessment of the creative productions developed within that relationship. If Cogeval is suggesting that designers were allowed (for reasons not explained) a unique freedom of expression, that would contradict the view of Fascism as a totalitarian regime proposed by Emilio Gentile in the historical overview that follows Cogeval's introduction to the catalogue.<sup>87</sup> In fact, Gentile's interpretation of Fascism invites the readers to reconsider the episodes, critical issues, manifestos, interventions, and debates surrounding the decorative arts. Without undermining our appreciation of vivid and varied productions, this argument addresses the fact that visual culture – encompassing decoration, as well as the fine arts, architecture, cinema, and illustration – was co-opted by the regime for its own authoritarian goals. This cooperation, difficult in some ways, was facilitated by the fact that some of Fascism's favoured themes, ideas and myths had already been anticipated by the artists themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The comments and reviews of commentators, intellectuals, and colleagues who were contemporaries of Rosso, when he was active in Italy, clearly show that his work was valued and considered significant. They regarded his decoration as 'modern', i.e. effectively interpreting his context through imagery experienced as up-to-date. It was fancifully humorous, engaging, and unafraid of associating traditional motifs and solutions with stylistic novelties borrowed from national and international contemporary tendencies. Thanks to the success and respect that Rosso accrued, he was able to secure a stable position within the Italian art world of the period, and was held up as an example of successful collaboration with manufacturers in reviving the applied arts. Rosso managed to remain in this prominent position during the following decade, when he was involved, with many others, in the politicisation of the aesthetics promoted by the fascist regime. However, after the catastrophe of World War II and his relocation to Brazil, Rosso's works were quickly forgotten. His oeuvre looked doubly suspicious:

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<sup>87</sup> Gentile (2015), pp. 22-27.

first, as an example of the compromised art of the *ventennio*; and second, for its eminently decorative character.

Before Anna Maria Damigella and Stefano Franzo's studies, Giulio Rosso's output had been mentioned in only a few studies, generally in short references drawn from the same sources: Scarpa and Giovannetti's articles, which have provided the *leitmotifs* that have informed the post-war (mis)understanding of this decorator. In general, scholars have analysed only a few schemes dating from the second half of the 1920s as Rosso's sole genuine, if superficially decorative, output. When, during the mid-1980s, research was carried out on the architectural heritage left by the regime, Rosso's role, although recurrent and consistent, was offhandedly assessed and again misinterpreted. All of these studies have one element in common: they approach Rosso indirectly, while focusing on other subjects variously linked with the decorator. They all select singular episodes of his production, or a specific aspect of his multiple collaborations with architects, artisans, colleagues, and patrons: the vision they offer is always partial, their accounts full of lacunae, and their critical judgment invariably suspended. Because of their fragmented nature, and the lack of interest in any critical approach, these accounts have contributed to maintaining a prejudice that, so far, only Franzo's article has seriously challenged.

In the following chapters, I will make the case for a creative output that, once analysed in relation to the principles of its own practice, can be recognised as significant, valuable, and extremely revealing of the complex social and ideological dynamics in which it was embedded. In this way, I hope to contribute an understanding of the visual and material culture produced during the *ventennio* in four ways: first, by challenging the hierarchical approach that privileges expressions of the fine arts over the 'decorative'; second by resurrecting a creative output unjustly neglected, Rosso's body of work, and the entire web of professional connections and social relationships in which he flourished; third, by showing how the interwar period was a much more complex and ambiguous context for creativity than it is generally acknowledged, with multiple phases and shifting debates; and fourth, by affirming the value of works of decorative art that, although preoccupied with expressing absolutely objectionable and despicable ideological imperatives, were beautifully designed, inviting rich and multi-layered interpretations.



## Part I. A modern decorator



Giulio Rosso, *The Arts*, tempera on paper, 1923; private collection



## 2. Becoming a decorator (and what it actually meant)

*'The development of civilisation is in large part due to the mysterious and divine passion of men for decorating whatever object they need for their existence, from the cribs to the tombs, from the placid tools of the domestic life to the fierce weapons of vengeance and war. Thus, the decorative arts are the direct, instinctive, sincere aesthetic expression of peoples, of which they reveal the characters, the tendencies and the mutability of desires and habit...'*<sup>1</sup>

*'Our spiritual needs are different, and higher worlds than those of decoration offer us more commensurate experience. It seems justified to affirm: "the more cultivated a people becomes, the more decoration disappears" (surely it was Loos who put it so neatly).'*<sup>2</sup>

In the first section of this chapter, I reconstruct Giulio Rosso's beginnings, from 1911, date of one of his first sketches, to the end of his first working experience in 1921. I highlight those elements that appear crucial in the development of his career, namely, the training he received, the artistic references available to him, and the working contacts he established. I will outline the various creative and professional approaches he was exposed to through the work of his masters, pointing out, in particular, the pivotal role played by Galileo Chini (1873–1956), whose teaching informed Rosso's attitude toward the practice of decoration. Once it has been firmly established that decoration was the creative field within which Rosso was formed and operated, I will analyse the status, considerations, and contemporary debates that developed after World War I around this creative practice. By going beyond the period of Rosso's training, to embrace the whole *ventennio*, this analysis will define the main themes that shaped Rosso's response to the larger theoretical background against which his oeuvre will be assessed in the following chapters.

The development of the debate around decoration was neither clear nor coherent; during this period, different tendencies confronted each other, putting the practice at

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<sup>1</sup> Corrado Ricci, 'Prefazione', in Fabio Bargagli Petrucci, *Storia delle Arti Decorative*, 2 vols., (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1924), I, p. III.

<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier, *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (first published 1925), in Isabelle Frank (ed.), *The Theory of Decorative Arts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 213–214.



the core of their contrasting agendas. Heralded by some critics, such as Ricci, as a possible source of new stimuli for fine artists who wanted to re-engage actively with society, decoration was despised by others, who, following Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and Adolf Loos (1870–1933), regarded it as a bad habit of the past that society should get rid of, once and for all. Between these two extremes, intellectuals, artists, and architects debated the significance of the ‘decorative’, arguing about the boundaries of the practice – constantly disputed between crafts and arts, artists and architects – and its space of expression: from tiny objects in the domestic interior to monumental architecture and collective spaces. The time seemed ripe for a definitive dismissal of the distinction between the fine and decorative arts, consistent with the artists’ increasing aspiration to be involved in contemporary society and engage with different forms of creativity, both high and low.

At the same time, efforts to promote a less sectorial approach to creativity were problematic. Fine artists involved with monumental enterprises of architectural decoration tended to distinguish their approach – the ‘great decoration’ – from the low status practice of decorating objects or private and commercial spaces.<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the decade, the involvement of fine artists in decorative enterprises supported by the fascist regime shifted the terms of debate back towards the usual issues of salon-art criticism: confrontation among schools, tendencies, languages, and the originality of individual expressions. Fine artists maintained their authority over decorators, while establishing a difficult relationship with architects. For all their writings about the potentialities of this new decorative turn, they failed to relinquish their status as privileged creatives, forcing decorators, paradoxically, to question the rules of their own practice. As Chapters 3–6 will explore, Rosso navigated the *ventennio* without ever distancing himself from the rules of his practice, producing a vast, varied, and extremely revealing output that encompassed all of the traditional applications of the ‘decorative’. Yet, Rosso’s involvement in the regime’s monumental programme, discussed in Chapter 7, forced him to face a new challenge, balancing contrasting demands for both ‘monumental masterpieces’ and honest murals in a ‘purely decorative spirit’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fagone, Vittorio, Ginex, Giovanna and Sparagni, Tulliola (eds.), *Muri ai Pittori. Pittura murale e decorazione in Italia 1930–1950*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, ‘Arti decorative: l’oggetto corre dietro la propria ombra’, *Nuova Antologia*, 1543 (1936), 63.

## 2.1 The training of the decorator (1911–1921)

The earliest known works by Rosso are a group of drawings collected by the artist in a large yellow envelope labelled 'Giulio Rosso, Florence, drawings, 1911, fourteen years old', and kept in the artist's archive in Sao Paulo. Florence was Rosso's birthplace. Although throughout his career, he would be labelled a 'Roman artist', he was born in the Tuscan city on 5 September 1897, the first of three children of Ferdinando, an officer of the Royal Mail, and his wife Niccola Zani.<sup>5</sup> A photograph from the family album in the archive shows Rosso and his relatives in the back garden of the house at 45 via Camerata (fig. 2.1).<sup>6</sup> The image matches historian Roberto Cantagalli's description of the inhabitants of the new quarters built outside the city walls: 'clerical class, petit bourgeois, who lived on meagre incomes and expressed their sought-after respectability in decent clothes and immaculately kept sitting rooms'.<sup>7</sup> The young Rosso, at the centre of the family group, holds in his arms a little dog, similar to one that is often shown running in his decorative schemes from the 1920s.

The drawings in the envelope reveal a process of stylistic development that must have run parallel to his studies. After the first, souvenir-like representations of Florentine landmarks, a group of sketches (one of them dated 1913) on small square pieces of paper are characterised by a quicker and looser approach (figs. 2.2, 2.3). With few lines, Rosso gives a sense of the settings, usually a square or street animated by the presence of ordinary people. Although some are just sketches, a few of these drawings were reproduced by Rosso more than once, and eventually traced in ink, suggesting that he considered them finished works. As the signed one entitled *Genova, piazza Caricamento* illustrates, Rosso's fascination with genre scenes – which often recurred in later decorative works – was already developed at this early stage in his training, even though probably outside the official, very traditional, academic curriculum (fig. 2.4). It is difficult to identify the formal sources that inspired these experiments. Rosso might have seen Joseph Pennell's (1871–1946) sketchy and lively Tuscan drawings, exhibited in 1912 at the Lyceum (fig. 2.5).<sup>8</sup> The first Florentine exhibition of the Futurists, held in 1913–14,

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<sup>5</sup> Archivio Storico del Comune di Firenze (ASCF), Fondo Comune di Firenze, Anagrafe coll. CF 18157, Manoscritto annullato a nome Zani Luigi fu Savino, foglio n. 55985.

<sup>6</sup> AGR, photographic album, 'Florence, 1921'.

<sup>7</sup> Roberto Cantagalli, *Storia del Fascismo Fiorentino*, (Florence: Vallecchi, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Lucia Monaci Moran (ed.), *La Toscana di Joseph Pennel tra Otto e Novecento*, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2004), p. XIII.

could also have been important in showing the young decorator how to subvert the rigidities of his academic course, although Rosso's subjects more closely resemble the post-futurist works by Ardengo Soffici (1879–1964) and Ottone Rosai (1895–1957).<sup>9</sup> A closer reference seems to have been to the paintings of Tuscan people and villages by minor artists such as Guido Ferroni (1888–1979) (fig. 2.6) and Antonio Salvetti (1854–1931) or illustrators such as Pietro Bernardini (1891–1974) (fig. 2.7), who worked for the magazine *L'Eroica*. Another source of potential inspiration might have been the illustrations in children's magazines such as *Il Giornalino della Domenica* and *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, which hired the best Italian 'pupazzettisti' (draughtsmen of puppet-like figures) of this period, including Bruno Bramanti (1897–1957). Indeed, a 'pupazzesque' influence on Rosso's approach to decoration (discussed in Chapter 3) seems consistent with the humour generally commented on in his early works.

Rosso enrolled at the *Preparatorio* course of the Florence Academy of Fine Arts on 4 November 1912. He passed the *rassegna* (exam) and attended the three-year *Comune* course (he features in a school photograph taken in the courtyard of the Academy in 1913, fig. 2.8).<sup>10</sup> In 1916–17, Rosso attended the first year of the final course, which, if completed, would have earned him a Diploma in *Disegno d'Ornato*. It focused on architectural decoration and the applied arts, aiming to train decorators who, instead of pursuing a career as fine artists, would collaborate with architects and private companies. Rosso attended classes on perspective, decorative composition, and the further study of art history.<sup>11</sup> His training included the study of models in relief, vegetal and animal forms, and their copy in different techniques, including pencil, pen, watercolour, tempera, and oil, and assignments on different themes prepared weekly (indoors) and biweekly (outdoors), as well as studies of folded fabrics and three dimensional ornament.<sup>12</sup> The students studied models of Renaissance Florentine decoration; the History of Art textbook spanned the centuries from Greek and Roman

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<sup>9</sup> Artemisia Calcagni Abrami and Lucia Chimirri (eds.), *Arte Moderna a Firenze: Cataloghi di esposizioni 1900–1933*, (Florence: Centro Di, 1988), p. 34. Ardengo Soffici joined the Futurist movement in 1913. Rosai became part of the group after visiting the 1913 exhibition. They had both distanced themselves from Marinetti's movement by the end of 1914. See: Carlo Cresti, *Firenze 1896–1915. La Stagione del Liberty*, (Florence: Uniedit, 1978), pp. 208–209.

<sup>10</sup> Archivio dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze (AABAF), Registro Generale degli Studenti 1905–1922, n. 1303 – Rosso Giulio.

<sup>11</sup> Luigi Biagi, *L'Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze*, (Florence: Le Monnier, 1941), pp. 158–163.

<sup>12</sup> AABAF, Filza 103b, 'Scuola d'Ornato e Pittura Decorativa', Augusto Burchi, *Programma l'anno Speciale*.

art to the Impressionists, neglecting everything produced during the previous forty years.<sup>13</sup> The Professor of *Elementi di Ornato* and Geometric Design since 1915 was the celebrated Florentine artist Galileo Chini, who had recently replaced Adolfo De Carolis (1874–1928) in assisting Augusto Burchi (1853–1919), Rosso’s master during the early years.<sup>14</sup>

Rosso interrupted his studies in August 1917, when he was called up for the army. The 1911 envelope contains three drawings that recall this period: *Roma 1 Granatieri reparto autonomo, Il Rancio* (the meal) and *Neo aspirante* (figs. 2.9, 2.10). They show a tenuous line, a simplification of forms, nervous contours, and strong chiaroscuro that anticipates future stylistic choices. Although Rosso had joined the army shortly before the disastrous defeat at Caporetto (24 October 1917), he survived the final phase of the conflict. After being severely affected by pneumonia and found unfit for military service, he was discharged in August 1919 and went back to Florence.<sup>15</sup> Maybe feeling dissatisfied with his formal education at the Academy, he did not enrol in the final year of the *Ornato* class. At the end of 1919, Rosso was recruited by the Società Anonima Cooperativa Edilizia Moderna, a company set up in 1916 by the Cerruti brothers’ banking group to invest in housing in the Capital.<sup>16</sup> Rosso’s hiring was probably influenced by the architect Gaetano Rapisardi (1893–1988), who, in 1915, attended the Special Course of Architecture at the Florence Academy, where he and Rosso became close friend.<sup>17</sup> Rapisardi was the son-in-law and associate of the architect Gino Coppedè (1866–1927), planner, for the Società Edilizia Moderna, of the Quartiere Coppedè, a complex of luxury apartments and villas for the Roman elite.

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<sup>13</sup> Camillo Jacopo Cavallucci, *Manuale di Storia dell’Arte* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1905).

<sup>14</sup> Burchi was appointed Professor of *Ornato e Decorazione* in 1912. His contract required him to teach classes in *Plastica ornamentale*, unpaid. In 1912, students welcomed the arrival of Adolfo De Carolis as his assistant. When De Carolis asked for a long period of leave, Burchi regained his authority. Until the arrival of Chini, he was solely responsible for the course. ABAF, Registro, Filze 101°, 101b ‘Scuola d’Ornato’, 104a and 104b ‘1915’.

<sup>15</sup> AGR, Documents, Regio Esercito Italiano, 1 Regimento Granatieri, Foglio di Congedo Assoluto del soldato semplice Giulio Rosso, Agosto 1919.

<sup>16</sup> AGR, Documents, Edilizia Moderna, Certificato di Impiego di Giulio Rosso, Dicembre 1919–Agosto 1921.

<sup>17</sup> Rapisardi appears as Rosso’s best man on the 1927 wedding certificate of Giulio and Vitaliana Bacchini (born on 22 October 1905 in Gabicce, Marche region). AGR, Documents, Governatorato di Roma, Estratto per Riassunto del Registro degli Atti di Matrimonio dell’anno 1927, certificato di nozze di Giulio Rosso e Vitaliana Bacchini, 11/07/1927. On Rapisardi see: Elena Ippoliti, ‘I concorsi di architettura tra le riviste e la pratica professionale. L’attività dell’architetto Gaetano Rapisardi tra teoria e prassi nel periodo 1921–1931’, in Alberto Grijalba Bengoetxea and Marta Ubeda Blanco (eds.), *Concursos de Arquitectura*, (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2012), pp. 489–494.

Rosso was hired as *disegnatore* (draughtsman), to turn original sketches into designs that could be reproduced by sculptors, mosaic makers, glassworkers, and ironmongers. After some time, he was promoted to the post of painter/decorator. In this capacity, Rosso worked on the decorative schemes for three large buildings, known as *Palazzi degli Ambasciatori*, and conceived by Coppedè as the monumental entrance to the Quartiere (fig. 2.11). The block was finished in 1921, when Rosso left the company. Probably, he assisted or collaborated with Giulio degli Innocenti – an obscure artist known only for some sgraffiti works – and sculptor Giovannetti.<sup>18</sup> One can recognize Rosso's hand in the external sgraffiti of the *Palazzi*, which include putti holding garlands, ribbons, and coat of arms, as well as hunting scenes (figs. 2.12–2.15). The figures are delineated against a plain background, underlining the harmonious fluency of the shapes: the putti, plump and fleshy, and the knight, muscular and tense, as he shoots an arrow at a deer. The curly forms framing the openings and the contours of Rosso's scenes are also interesting; sometimes they form a symmetrical candelabra, while at other times, they develop freely, creating sprigs of fantastic, luxuriant vegetation. Chini's reference is evident in these works, both in Rosso's style and in his choice of motifs.

## 2.2 The masters and the examples

When the critic Carlo Tridenti described Rosso's training in 1927, he identified Burchi and Chini as his masters.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that Rosso himself passed on this information to Tridenti, whose typed draft of this text is kept in Rosso's archive. Rosso wanted to present himself as the successor to a tradition that extended from Burchi, through the celebrated Chini. Augusto Burchi, Rosso's first master, during his lifetime was a renowned decorative painter, although he is now almost completely forgotten. He was a pupil of Gaetano Bianchi (1819–1892), a representative of the Tuscan regional school, one of many that retained an important role in post-Risorgimento Italy. Resisting the call for a national style to embody the new direction of the unified country, Bianchi and Burchi offered alternatives, rooted in local figurative traditions. The basis of this approach was the practice of restoration, which many decorators of the time, and

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<sup>18</sup> Sgraffiti by Giulio degli Innocenti and his son Flavio decorate the Tizios' family tomb and the external wall of the villa Anna Frank in Grottaferrata, Rome (Comune di Grottaferrata, Deliberazione n. 110 28/06/2011, p. 8). Degli Innocenti and Giovannetti's interventions are only mentioned by Mario Cozzi in Bossaglia's book on the Coppedès - the only comprehensive study of the family of architects and artists published to date. Rossana Bossaglia and Mario Cozzi, *I Coppedè*, (Genova: Edises, 1982), p. 214.

<sup>19</sup> Carlo Tridenti, *La Quirinetta*, (Rome: La Rotografica, 1927), p. 9.

certainly Bianchi and Burchi, carried out on damaged cycles of Medieval and early Renaissance murals. As a result, they could rely on an extraordinary reserve of technical and stylistic knowledge, gained through direct contact with canonical works of the glorious Florentine tradition of mural art. Bianchi's decorative schemes were inspired by those by Giotto, as is evident in the frescos for the Villa Le Corti (San Casciano, 1880s) (fig. 2.16). Burchi developed a neo-renaissance style largely indebted to fifteenth and sixteenth century Florentine artists (fig. 2.17). His success in meeting the expectations of public institutions, as well as wealthy private patrons, including the Strozzi (Palazzo Strozzi, 1888–89), earned him a teaching role at the Florence Academy, to which he dedicated the last years of his life.<sup>20</sup>

However, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, the historicist style championed by Burchi fell out of fashion. Bianchi and Burchi's approach was limited by its constant references to the local tradition. Even when their works met with success, they were overshadowed by contemporary proposals for a national style, such as the one advanced by artist Cesare Maccari (1840–1919). Maccari attempted a compromise: on the one hand, he conveyed the epic and moral imperatives of the new kingdom by realistically narrating recent historical events (the Risorgimento Hall in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, 1886–87) or stories of ancient Rome (the Yellow Hall of Palazzo Madama, Rome, 1881–88) (figs. 2.18, 2.19). On the other hand, he also created more imaginative allegorical compositions, such as the scheme for the Grand Hall of the Palazzo di Giustizia in Rome, 1903 (fig. 2.20).<sup>21</sup> Maccari tried to bring into mural decoration the fresh and unrhetorical approach that the Macchiaioli and Veristi painters had experimented with.<sup>22</sup> However, he was aware that public architecture was a space suited to ideologically charged discourses that rejected an uncompromising approach to reality. The public murals commissioned by the state welcomed, above all, heroic narratives of the Risorgimento, and allegories and exemplary episodes from the past.

Less representative contexts allowed for a more playful approach, through which imaginative and original forms of stylistic pastiche could emerge, influenced by foreign

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<sup>20</sup> Daniele Galleni, *La formazione di Augusto Burchi. Dalla bottega di Gaetano Bianchi alla Sala del Consiglio Provinciale di Cosenza*, unpublished essay provided by the author, 10/11/2014.

<sup>21</sup> Orietta Rossi Pinelli, 'Dopo l'Unità: Nuovi Spazi e Nuovi Temi nella Pittura Murale', in Carlo Bertelli et al. (eds.), *La Pittura in Italia: L'Ottocento*, 2 vols., (Milan: Electa, 1991), II, p. 567–574.

<sup>22</sup> Caterina Bon Valsassina, 'La pittura a Roma nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento', in Carlo Bertelli et al. (eds.), *La Pittura in Italia: L'Ottocento*, 2 vols., (Milan: Electa, 1991), I, p. 446.

examples and challenging the academic canon. Gino Coppedè's architecture and the flamboyant decorative schemes of his buildings, illustrate this approach. Rosso, who spent the first months of his career in Coppedè's workshop, had a chance to reinvent the repertoires he had absorbed in Burchi's class. Indeed, Coppedè represented an alternative to academic architecture, one that, although rooted in the provincialism of Tuscany, was characterised by 'a certain humorous attitude, a light hearted and playful inclination', more concerned with a suggestive atmosphere than with a rigorous application of style.<sup>23</sup> All scholarly pretentiousness and stylistic coherence were dropped in order to achieve a spatial spectacle, and mural decoration was an integral part of this process. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive study of the artists involved in the workshop, of whom only the names of Carlo Coppedè (1868–1952), Nicola Mascialino (1854–1945), Giulio degli Innocenti and now Giulio Rosso are known.<sup>24</sup> Bossaglia has pointed out that Carlo contributed to the architectural fantasies of his brother, with compositions inspired by a fanciful and enchanted past, reminiscent of the art of early Renaissance artists such as Benozzo Gozzoli (ca. 1420–1497), as well as of contemporaries including Carl Larsson (1853–1919) and Byam Shaw (1872–1919).<sup>25</sup> In the Quartiere Coppedè, the area in which Rosso worked when employed by the firm, the influence of British artists such as Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) and the Russian Mir Iskusstva group – especially Ivan Bilibin (1876–1941) – can be detected in the medieval capriccios that appear in tempera and sgraffito friezes (figs. 2.21, 2.22).

In his article on Rosso's beginnings, Piero Scarpa observed that Rosso was unhappy with the 'fixed theme decorations' and 'old formal prejudices' that he was expected to produce in Coppedè's workshop.<sup>26</sup> By that time, Coppedè's irreverent historicism was falling out of fashion. Whether authentic or not, Rosso's dissatisfaction reflected a more general sense of discomfort with models, styles, and approaches set during the second part of the nineteenth century and considered largely inadequate for representing complex reality and the aspirations of the country after the shock of World War I. Rosso must have experienced a revelation when Galileo Chini took over the post of *aggiunto* (assistant) to the *Ornato* class at the Florence academy in 1915 and showed his students

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<sup>23</sup> Bossaglia (1982), p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Nicola Mascialino collaborated with Gino Coppedè until 1922. Giulio E. M. Peloso, *La Vita e le Opere di Nicola Mascialino*, (Genoa: Arti Grafiche Cesare Sobrero, 1957), p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Bossaglia (1982), p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> GNAM, Archivio Bioiconografico, fasc. 'Giulio Rosso', Piero Scarpa, 'Giulio Rosso', *Il Messaggero*, 1926.

what a modern decorator could be and do. Indeed, Chini is a key figure in the development of Italian decoration in the first decades of the twentieth century; his work and instruction had a lasting impact on Rosso's approach to the practice of decoration.

Chini himself was trained in Burchi's workshop and was rooted in the tradition of Florentine Renaissance mural decoration. Nevertheless, he expanded his repertoire to include references and contemporary foreign tendencies absorbed through magazines and visits abroad.<sup>27</sup> Between the beginning of the 1900s and the 1920s, he won the favour of public and private patrons, introducing Art Nouveau, the Viennese Secession, and Art Deco cadences into the provincial Italian context.<sup>28</sup> Key examples includes the panels for the 1914 Venice Biennale (fig. 2.23), 'maybe the best result *tout-court* of Italian Secessionism', and decorative schemes for the Tamerici Baths in Montecatini (1909) and the Berzieri Baths in Salsomaggiore (1922), which featured solutions typical of Art Deco (fig. 2.24).<sup>29</sup> In 1909, with the decoration of the dome of the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (fig. 2.25), inspired by verses by Antonio Fradeletto (1858–1930), he measured himself against Giulio Aristide Sartorio's (1860–1932) scheme presented two years before and considered one of the highest achievements of Italian Symbolism. Sartorio's four panels – entitled *La Luce*, *le Tenebre*, *L'Amore*, and *La Morte* (Light, Darkness, Love, and Death) – used compositions of twisted naked bodies to illustrate the 'human poem', with verses (by himself) featured in the scenes (fig. 2.26).<sup>30</sup> Sartorio belonged to a group of artists who, following the example of the French and German Symbolists, shifted from the narration of events towards compositions set in an unspecified historical dimension and populated by personified allegories, mythological figures, and legendary creatures. Heavily influenced by the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938), who was the main representative of Italian symbolist and decadent poetry and literature, these artists were later called the D'Annunzian painters.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fabio Benzi, 'Galileo Chini affreschista e decoratore', in Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Ad Vivendum – Galileo Chini. La Stagione dell'Incanto*, (Pistoia: Maschietto Editore, 2002), pp. 11, 50–55.

<sup>28</sup> Cresti (1978), p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Giandomenico Romanelli (ed.), *Ottant'anni di Allestimenti alla Biennale*, (Venice: La Biennale, 1977), p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco and Maurizio Marini (eds.), *Pittori Dannunziani: Letteratura e Immagini tra '800 e '900*, (Rome: Bulzoni, 1977).



Chini rejected the elitism and poetry-inspired themes of Sartorio, downplaying the symbols of creative struggle and individual genius 'with an ironic lilt.'<sup>32</sup> He was aware of the advantages and limits of D'Annunzian symbolism. On the one hand, by referencing stylistic novelties introduced by the Pre-Raphaelite artists, Art Nouveau, and Secession, and creating compositions that avoided narrative and favoured timeless settings, the symbolists emancipated themselves from regional and local traditions, and were able to represent a viable national art.<sup>33</sup> Purged of its more mysterious and unsettling atmospheres, symbolist decoration even found a place on the walls of public buildings, with interesting results, as can be seen in Sartorio's frieze in the House of Deputies at Montecitorio Palace in Rome (1908–12). On the other hand, symbolism was generally ill-suited to embody the optimistic and rhetorical content often associated with mural decorations in public spaces. On the walls of private villas or urban houses, its sibylline and often erotically charged compositions could scandalize a provincial bourgeoisie that aspired to a role in society, based on decency and reverence for traditional values. Thanks to his omnivorous aptitude for appropriation, Chini absorbed the novelties of the symbolist language, as he had appropriated others, while correcting and adapting them for different contexts. Indeed, Chini deployed his talent as a decorator in a wide range of fields and spaces; he was probably the first decorator to cross the boundary between high and low traditions in mural decoration, demonstrating that noteworthy artistic results could be achieved even in modern spaces of leisure and spectacle.

A similar approach can be seen in his designs for the applied arts. Chini supported closer ties between the decorative arts and industry, promoting the collaboration among artists, architects, and craftsmen. To put his convictions into practice, in 1910, he founded the *Casa d'Arte*; in 1917, in a manifesto entitled *Rinnovando Rinnoviamoci* (Renewing, let us renew ourselves), he demanded that all academies be replaced by schools of industrial design.<sup>34</sup> Yet, although he advocated for a comprehensive artistic experience that could overcome the divide between the higher and lower arts, Chini was not interested in the social role of the artist. His sole preoccupation was to broaden creative resources and possibilities without abandoning the tradition he had inherited

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<sup>32</sup> Romanelli (1977), p. 13; Gianni Vianello (ed.), *Galileo Chini 1873–1956*, (Lido di Camaiore: Arti Grafiche Pardini, 1964), pp. 28–29.

<sup>33</sup> Rossana Bossaglia (ed.), *Adolfo De Carolis e il Liberty nelle Marche*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> Monica Amari, *I Musei delle Aziende: La Cultura della Tecnica tra Arte e Storia*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001), p. 54.

from his (and Rosso's) master, Burchi. Chini's multi-layered approach to decoration is the key to understanding Rosso's. His eclectic engagement with repertoires, light-hearted take on themes, and ability to absorb and elaborate on any stylistic novelty or range with ease – from architectural decoration to the applied arts – were all characteristics appropriated by Rosso. Although the period they spent in direct contact was brief, Chini was Rosso's true master, and Rosso was Chini's most faithful and successful pupil.

The first commentators on Rosso's work, while highlighting his prestigious pedigree, also developed the clichéd storyline of the stubborn young artist, intolerant of any academic discipline. As Scarpa reported in 1926, 'showing little proclivity to learn art through rational and methodical teaching, [Rosso] moved away from the school and master in order to make it on his own'.<sup>35</sup> Tridenti even suggested that Rosso was '*bocciato*' (rejected) by a narrow-minded academy.<sup>36</sup> In fact, if Rosso was not pleased with the school, it cannot be said that the school was unhappy with him – as a document in Rosso's archive proves. At the end of the academic year, in July 1917, Rosso earned a special mention from an internal commission chaired by sculptor Domenico Trentacoste (1859–1933).<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Rosso wanted to sever the connection between his practice and the approach promoted by old-fashioned institutions and backward architects, as Coppedè was considered at the time. This narrative, certainly backed by the decorator, manifests his eagerness to present himself as an innovator in a context in which decoration was generating increasing levels of interest, and boundaries among the arts were consistently challenged.

### 2.3 Challenging and re-establishing hierarchies: the role of decoration in the interwar debate

At the start of Rosso's career, 'Art and decoration' – to cite the title of an article by artist and polemicist Ardengo Soffici – were considered two distinct practices, carried out by practitioners with different academic training and career paths.<sup>38</sup> What was the difference? In another article, Soffici explained: both the fine artist and the decorator

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<sup>35</sup> GNAM, Scarpa (1926).

<sup>36</sup> Tridenti (1927), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> AGR, Documents, Regio Istituto di Belle Arti, 'Menzione Onorevole di Primo Grado all'alunno Giulio Rosso', Sezione di Disegno d'Ornato, Corso Speciale, Anno Primo, 18/07/1917.

<sup>38</sup> In Ardengo Soffici, *Periplo dell'Arte – Ritorno all'Ordine*, (Florence: Vallecchi, 1928), pp. 58–64.

had to master 'chromatic and linear harmony, the architecture of volumes, the relationship between light and dark tones, the arabesque, the exquisite chord, and the mixture of colours'. However, while the latter sacrificed everything to these ends the former had to 'intrigue the intellect and the whole being of the observer'.<sup>39</sup> Soffici here confirmed a distinction established since the beginning of the modern era: decorators dealt with sensuous and superficial values of arts to please the eyes of the observers, while fine artists engaged intellectually with the public. The former created works in response to external requirements involving space, object, materials, and patrons, while the latter (allegedly) disentangled themselves from any external bonds and dedicated their art to free, personal and original expression.

This view was at the origin of the commonly accepted distinction between decorative and easel painters. The decorator, as described in 1902 by British artist Alfred Lys Baldry (1858–1939), 'as many people conceive, does not rank with the picture painter, and has no claim to be judged by the higher standards of aestheticism. He is a craftsman rather than an artist.'<sup>40</sup> Instead, since the Renaissance, fine artists had emancipated themselves from craft and built a new status 'somewhere in the upper echelons of society'.<sup>41</sup> This distinction is evident in national exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale and the Roman Secessions and Biennials, held during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Provisional murals, together with pieces of furniture, rugs, and vases, were arranged to provide a setting for paintings and sculptures, underlining the distinction between 'decoration' and 'art', and emphasizing their different places in the hierarchy.<sup>42</sup> Although generally unnoticed by contemporary scholarship, art and decoration were two artistic practices subject to radically different motivations, expectations, and debates.

The caesura caused by World War I enabled a reconsideration of a status quo that, in other contexts, thanks to the Arts and Crafts movement (from the 1880s), Nabis painters (1888), Glasgow School (1893), Munich Vereinigte Werkstätte (1898) and Deutscher

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 62–63.

<sup>40</sup> Alfred Lys Baldry, *Modern Mural Decoration*, (London: George Newness, 1902), p. 2

<sup>41</sup> Giovanni Previtali, 'The periodization of Italian Art History', in Giovanni Previtali (ed.), *History of Italian Art*, first edn Turin: Einaudi, 1979, 2 vols., (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, trans. Claire Dorey), II, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Romanelli (1977), p. 10.

Werkbund (1907), and Wiener Werkstätte (1903), had already been questioned.<sup>43</sup> The decorative arts were revalued for economic and nationalistic reasons. Besides, the principles of decoration were considered a possible response to the apparent crisis generated by the avant-garde. The uncompromising break with tradition – a consequence of the previous decades' radical challenges to figuration – raised fresh questions about the role of artists in society and their relationship with the public. Mario Recchi, commenting on the 1918 *Mostra d'Arte Indipendente* in Rome, wrote: 'art is back to collective expression, almost anonymous, of impersonal and comprehensive spiritual needs; [it is] an exercise in decorative motifs.'<sup>44</sup> The editor of the first issue of *La Casa Bella* called for 'no more paintings, no more useless statues for some time [...] instead, all ingenuities should focus on the new forms, lines and functions of the useful objects of our life'.<sup>45</sup> For those pushing for a reaction against pre-war obscure formal experimentations, decoration appealed because of its immediate aesthetic impact, conveyed through traditional, comprehensible codes. Decoration's wide-ranging engagement with the space of daily life seemed to offer options for the renewal of visual culture as a whole.<sup>46</sup>

Building on the sporadic initiatives of the first decade of the twentieth century, magazines were founded to discuss proposals, tastes, examples, and opinions; exhibitions were organised (for example the Biennial exhibition of modern decorative arts in Monza, launched in 1923) to promote the 'social function' of decoration.<sup>47</sup> 'Decoration must be the password of a new spirit, of an effort of re-evaluation and renaissance, of a conscious return to the unity of art and craft, assurance of new times' wrote the critic Roberto Papini in 1923, adding: 'true Italian art is the one that follows

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<sup>43</sup> Valerio Terraroli, 'Decorative Arts and Decoration...', in Domenico Quaranta et al., *Art of the Twentieth Century. The Artistic Culture between the Wars*, (Milan: Skira, 2006), pp. 297–305.

<sup>44</sup> Mario Recchi, *Mostra d'Arte Indipendente*, (Roma: L'Epoca, 1918), p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> 'Verso la duplice meta', *La Casa Bella*, 1 (1928), 10.

<sup>46</sup> Anty Pansera, '1902–1954. Cinquant'anni di evoluzione/rivoluzione', in Tersilia Faravelli Giacobone (ed.), *'900. Arti Decorative e Applicate del XX secolo*, (Milan: Lybria, 1990), p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Guido Marangoni, *La II Mostra Internazionale di Arti Decorative*, (Bergamo: Istituto di Arti Grafiche, 1925), p. 12. The organisation of the International Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art in Turin in 1902 was of particular significance for the debate around the decorative arts in Italy. There was also a section dedicated to the decorative and industrial arts at the International Exhibition of Milan in 1906. The magazine *Arte Italiana Decorativa e industriale* (1890–1911) focused on decoration, while examples of the decorative arts also featured in *L'Arte* (from 1898) and *Emporium* (from 1895). *L'Artista Italiano*, *Arte pura e decorativa* and *Architettura e Arte Decorativa* were founded in 1921, *Domus* and *La Casa Bella* in 1928.

an architectural-decorative principle'.<sup>48</sup> This relationship between architecture and decoration was pivotal. After World War I, the decadence of Italian decorative arts throughout the nineteenth century was often blamed on the parallel crisis experienced by architecture. 'If furniture is designed for ancient houses, it cannot be modern' lamented Raffaello Giolli.<sup>49</sup> Yet, new forms of space, boosted by the modern culture of leisure (theatres, cinemas, baths, casinos, and restaurants), as well as houses and villas commissioned by wealthy patrons, allowed a new generation of decorators to 'mobilize in order to offer new possibilities of pictorial integration.'<sup>50</sup> Experiments, such as those carried out by Chini, took advantage of complicit architectural contexts, although the general context was still dominated by historicist and late-symbolist approaches.

This situation was reflected in the sixth volume of the *Encyclopaedia of the Modern Italian Decorative Arts*, published in 1928 by Guido Marangoni (1872–1941), which associated architectural decoration with stone carving, mosaics, and artistic floors.<sup>51</sup> Marangoni, the first editor of the magazine *La Casa Bella*, and curator of the first three Monza biennials (1923, 1925, and 1927), supported a cautious modernisation, wary of both avant-garde tendencies and foreign influences.<sup>52</sup> In his account of mural art, only three schemes stood out for their 'modern' character: the 1921 *Sala Sarda* in the Roman Casa d'Arte Bragaglia by Melkiorre Melis (1889–1982) (fig. 2.27), Giulio Rosso's decorations for the Quirinetta in Rome (1927), and Bruno Santi's (1892–1957) scheme for the *Circolo della Caccia* in Bologna (1927) (fig. 2.28).<sup>53</sup> It is no coincidence that the stylised forms, with their humorous reworking of traditional repertoires, colourful compositions, and the representations of contemporaneity that made these schemes so different from others, were designed for a dancing hall, restaurant, and private club:

<sup>48</sup> Roberto Papini, *Le Arti a Monza nel 1923*, (Bergamo: Istituto Arti Grafiche, 1923), pp. 10, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Cesare de Seta (ed.), *Raffaello Giolli. Arte e Architettura 1910–1944*, (Cernobbio: Archivio Cattaneo, 2012), p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Giovanna Ginex, 'Il dibattito critico e istituzionale sul muralismo in Italia', in Vittorio Fagone, Giovanna Ginex, and Tulliola Sparagni (eds.), *Muri ai Pittori. Pittura murale e decorazione in Italia 1930–1950*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999), p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> Guido Marangoni, *Enciclopedia delle Moderne Arti Decorative Italiane – Vol VI: Decorazione Murale, Pietre Lavorate, Mosaico, Pavimento Artistico*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1928).

<sup>52</sup> For this reason, his volume does not discuss futurist experiments with architectural decoration, such as the Bar Tic Tac (1921) by Giacomo Balla (1878–1951) and the Cabaret del Diavolo (1922) by Fortunato Depero (1892–1960), both in Rome, the restaurant L'Altro Mondo (1923) by Gerardo Dottori (1884–1977) in Perugia, and the extraordinary Casa Zampini (1925–26) in Esanatoglia (Marche region) by Ivo Pannaggi (1901–1981). Marangoni considered them impractical eccentricities.

<sup>53</sup> Marangoni (1928), p. 116 and tabs. 35, 37, 38, 45.

public, but not official, leisure spaces, intended for a middle-class audience.<sup>54</sup> Melis, Rosso, and Santi engaged with the following problems: what kind of decoration was suitable for these new typologies of space? How should decorators adapt the narrative and didactic approach typical of the genre to their escapist and leisure character?

Such a tendency in ‘the use of decorating the walls of popular haunts with various figurations’ created a socially open aesthetic experience in spaces where people spent their free time.<sup>55</sup> Yet, although both the Roman art gallery, designed by futurist architect Virgilio Marchi (1895–1960), and the restaurant, designed by architect Marcello Piacentini, were celebrated as examples of modern architecture, they were both created in the refurbished basements of historical palaces in Rome’s city centre. Similarly, the Circolo della Caccia had its premises in the neoclassic Palazzo Zagnoni (later Spada) in the via Castiglione. To help these venues achieve success, architects had to design impressive, eye-catching interiors: the collaboration with decorators played a pivotal role.

In addition to the new social spaces, modern decorators were asked to enliven with their designs the architecture of the modern home. For Ponti and Marangoni, the question of a modern approach to the decorative arts could not be separated from architecture, in particular the design of the house.<sup>56</sup> ‘The Italian House’ was the title of the first editorial in *Domus*, where Ponti advocated a form of interior design that did not reject decoration, but aimed to achieve a balance between affordability, quality, modernity, and respect for tradition.<sup>57</sup> Rosso’s production throughout the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s participated in the design of modern Italian interiors that were designed to enhance the social and domestic experience of middle and upper-class people. Only at the start of the 1930s, did Rosso become involved in the ‘*grande decorazione*’ of public buildings.<sup>58</sup> At that point, the debate about the role of decoration in defining the modern space was reacting to a new scenario, the *en masse* involvement of Italian fine artists in monumental decoration.

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<sup>54</sup> Rosso’s scheme will be examined in Chapter 3.

<sup>55</sup> Carlo A. Felice, ‘Bacco e la pittura murale’, *Domus*, 10 (1928), 27–32.

<sup>56</sup> Elena Dellapiana, ‘I designer architetti’, in Fiorella Bulegato, Elena Dellapiana, *Il Design degli Architetti Italiani*, (Milan: Electa, 2014), p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Valerio Terraroli (ed.), *Le Arti Decorative in Lombardia in età Moderna 1780-1940*, (Milan: Skira, 1998), p. 345.

<sup>58</sup> Andrea Sironi (ed.), *Sironi: la grande decorazione*, (Milan: Electa, 2004).

The post-war craze for the decorative had two effects. On the one hand, it put in the spotlight professional decorators, such as Giulio Rosso. They were considered 'total artists', able to modernize practice without abandoning tradition or subverting the fundamental rules of adaptation to spatial requirements or the needs of patrons.<sup>59</sup> During the 1920s, the role of the decorator was recognised, celebrated, and supported. Gio Ponti hoped that 'our artist-decorators, masters, and architects, such as Giulio Rosso, Giovanni Guerrini, Tomaso Buzzi, and the two Cito Filomarinos, would be renowned and cared about in Italy, just as Jean Dufy, Hoffmann, and Hald & Gate are in France and in the world'.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, fine artists trained in easel painting and eager to break the isolation that seemed to haunt the avant-garde appropriated the genre of mural painting. While blurring the boundaries between these fields, they projected into the practice of decoration the tensions and dynamics that were animating the fine arts. In this, they were supported by architects who, sensible to the anti-decorative stance of the functionalists, rejected decoration in favour of 'true art' in the modern space.<sup>61</sup> This phenomenon begun during the first years after the war.

Since the early 1920s, Italian fine artists were encouraged to reflect upon their engagement with materials, techniques, and crafts, and to reassess their practice and role in society. They actively participated in the debate. In 1919, the artist Giorgio De Chirico (1888–1978) had published an article entitled significantly 'Ritorno al mestiere' (Return to the craft) in the magazine *Valori Plastici*. He confidently declared that:

'By now it is obvious: the painter-researchers, who for half a century rushed around and struggled, inventing schools and systems, sweating for the painstaking effort to look original, to show off a personality [...], today return, prudently and with hands outstretched like those who advance in the darkness, towards an art less cluttered with tricks, towards more concrete and clear forms, surfaces that may testify, without too many misunderstandings, to what one knows and is able to do.'<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The definition 'total artist' is used by Antonello Coccu to define Melkiorre Melis. Antonello Coccu (ed.), *Melkiorre Melis* (Nuoro: Ilisso, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Gio Ponti, 'I vetri incisi di Balsamo Stella', *Domus*, 5 (1929), 19.

<sup>61</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Verso gli artisti', *Domus*, 11 (1932), 645.

<sup>62</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, 'Il Ritorno al Mestiere', *Valori Plastici*, 11–12 (1919), 15–19.

De Chirico dismissed the values that had defined high culture since the Renaissance: originality, individuality, and autonomy of creation. By abjuring them, he wanted to push back the status of the artist to a pre-modern time, when no distinction existed between art and decoration. Likewise, Margherita Sarfatti, in the same year, invited artists to regain an 'internal architectural rhythm' by looking at the tradition of medieval mural art.<sup>63</sup> For Massimo Bontempelli (1870–1960), the artist had to first be an excellent 'worker', while art had to aspire toward being 'applied' rather than 'fine'.<sup>64</sup> It was not long before artists, after a long period when mural painting was left to decorators, re-engaged with the 'craft'. Gino Severini was one of the first artists to revive this practice, following up with consistent and intense theoretical activity. In 1921, the artist received a commission from Sir George Sitwell, owner of the Montegufoni castle in the province of Florence to fresco the walls of a room with characters from the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* (fig. 2.29).

The *Sala delle Maschere* was finished in 1922; in the words of the artist, 'those great characters, who were all around a strange party, playing with unusual instruments without strings, created an atmosphere of imaginative joy.'<sup>65</sup> The remainder of Severini's stint as a muralist in the 1920s was spent in Switzerland, decorating Catholic churches. He soon realised that the fantastic, light-hearted register he had used in the Sitwells' domestic space (like the modern spaces of spectacles illustrated in Marangoni's volume), could not be deployed in the service of religious or civil celebration. In 1927, he wrote that 'the severity of wall painting, the clear and straightforward reasoning that is its essential condition, its subordination to a practical end (limited freedom), in short, its discipline, can greatly help the artist to regain the "material" that his work needs, in order to be no longer a simple game, pure fun.'<sup>66</sup> Drawing on his knowledge and experience, Severini anticipated preoccupations that would become dominant in the 1930s, when the increasing weight of public patronage required artists to convey collective spiritual imperatives through works of decoration that aspired to a monumental dimension.

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<sup>63</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, 'Di alcuni principi generali', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 04/04/1919, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919–1943*, (Bologna: Minerva, 2000), p. 203.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Maria Alberti, 'Gli affreschi di Gino Severini nel castello di Montegufoni e il mito Novecentesco della *Commedia dell'Arte*', *Commedia dell'Arte*, IV (2011), 116 and 118.

<sup>66</sup> Gino Severini, 'Pittura Murale: sua estetica e suoi mezzi' (first published in *Nuova et Vetera*, 1927), in Gino Severini, *Ragionamenti sulle Arti Figurative* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), p. 91.



Parallel to this interest in decoration among artists, the contemporary debate also revived ornament as a carrier of the spiritual values of the time. Already in 1929, mirroring preoccupations exacerbated by the emergence of Fascism, Carlo A. Felice remarked emphatically that the decorative arts 'can make a Nation not only proud, but also produce profit and establish authority more effectively than the other arts: they [...] affirm a style, an epoch, a civilisation.'<sup>67</sup> This vision echoes Corrado Ricci's words quoted at the beginning of this chapter, as well as in an important article written by Margherita Sarfatti in 1936. She argued that the object 'participates in forming the aura and the aesthetic environment [that] shapes itself in the present and expresses along the centuries the physiognomy, the costume, and the style of the people and the period that created it'.<sup>68</sup> It is as interpreters of 'functions inherent in the spirit' that fine artists engaged and became preoccupied with decoration.<sup>69</sup> Severini praised mural art, because it gave artists a new opportunity: 'exalting, singing, intensifying the space, it highlights its authenticity and drives it towards a grade of perfection.'<sup>70</sup> As Mario Tinti argued, it was the task of decorative painting and sculpture to celebrate the lyrical content of architecture or, in Mario Sironi's view, 'the religious symbols of the will of the State'.<sup>71</sup> When, after the financial crisis of 1929, private patronage plummeted, artists increasingly relied on public commissions. Their decorative designs had to represent the social, moral and political imperatives of the dominant ideology.

In this context, it is useful to note that even rationalist architects were unwilling to ban decoration from their architecture. The Casa del Fascio in Como by Giuseppe Terragni featured decorative interventions by Mario Radice (1898–1987) and Marcello Nizzoli. For the meeting room, the former developed an abstract plastic composition of lines and colours that framed a photograph of the *Duce* (fig. 2.30). The latter planned to cover the vertical white wall on the right-hand side of the façade with photomontages and mottos (fig. 2.31). Although photographs were often used, rationalist architects did not disdain sculpture and painting. Giuseppe Pagano's *Sala d'Icaro* at the 1934 Mostra

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<sup>67</sup> Carlo A. Felice, 'Rispetto di noi stessi', *Domus*, 11 (1929), 27.

<sup>68</sup> Sarfatti (1936), 58.

<sup>69</sup> Susanna Weber, *Achille Funi e la pittura murale fra le due guerre*, (Firenze: SPES, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Gino Severini, 'L'Idolatria dell'Arte' (first published in *Critica Fascista*, 1927), in Severini (1936), pp. 42, 44, 72.

<sup>71</sup> Mario Tinti, 'Sculptura e pittura nell'architettura moderna', *Casabella*, 6 (1931), 53; Mario Sironi, 'Racemi d'Oro' (1935), quoted in Renato Miracco, 'Muralismo e muralismi: gli anni trenta di Mario Sironi', in Maristella Margozi (ed.), *Sironi Monumentale*, (Rovereto: MART, 2005), p. 8.

dell'Aeronautica featured a suspended statue by Marcello Mascherini (1906–1983) and murals by Bruno Munari (fig. 2.32). A photomontage of sculpted portraits of the Roman emperors by Nizzoli and a sculpture by Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) decorated the Salone della Vittoria designed by Giacomo Palanti (1906–1977) and Edoardo Persico (1900–1936) at the 1936 Triennale (fig. 2.36). Wall paintings by Ottone Rosai adorned the interior of the Santa Maria Novella railway station in Florence, designed by the Gruppo Toscano headed by Giovanni Michelucci (1891–1990) (fig. 2.33).

Although I am mentioning only the canonical 'masterpieces' of Italian Rationalism, there were numerous examples, which have been generally neglected by scholarship. In his *Arte Decorativa Italiana*, Pagano admitted that, although 'to more than one it seemed that modern architecture had banned poetry and loathed any intervention of the arts', when there is some 'sense of distribution of surfaces, volume, and tones [and] painting becomes architecture of colours and tones', a coexistence with the rationalist space is possible.<sup>72</sup> Bruno Moretti, editor of the magazine *Rassegna di Architettura* and a supporter of Rationalism wrote: 'decoration is the word of architecture; the latter is, in itself, pure sensation.'<sup>73</sup> However, the relationship between rationalist architecture and decoration was underpinned by the architect's strict control over the work of her or his collaborators (who, generally, were always the same). In 1940, Moretti argued that architecture should be considered the 'dominant art', because it provided all of the other arts with reasons to mutate and develop.<sup>74</sup>

These comments highlight an evident tension: fine artists coming from centuries of independent and (allegedly) autonomous practice to engage with the decoration of architecture did not easily relinquish their role as active and individual interpreters of spiritual, poetic or symbolical content. On the other hand, the programme of the 1930 Monza Biennale clearly stated that architecture shaped the manifestation of all decorative arts.<sup>75</sup> Fascist patronage, although moderately open to any kind of stylistic expression, was largely directed by cultural impresarios such as Antonio Maraini and Cipriano Efisio Oppo (1891–1961) who viewed the relationship between art and the

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<sup>72</sup> Pagano (1938), pp. 9, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Giuseppe Polvara and Bruno Moretti, *Architettura Razionale*, (Milan: B. Angelico, 1934), p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> B. M. (Bruno Moretti), 'L'architettura e le arti figurative', *Rassegna di Architettura*, 1 (1940), 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Catalogo Ufficiale della IV Esposizione Triennale Internazionale delle Arti Decorative ed Industriali Moderne*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1930).

masses as mediated by public architecture not as dialectical, challenging, or participatory, but as 'paternalistic, fetishist, and passive.'<sup>76</sup> Fine artists, for their part, showed little interest in tolerating the strict control that patrons or architects wanted to enforce. Thus, the way was paved for the heated polemics that characterised the emergence of Muralism (1933) and all the unorthodox experiments carried out by the most advanced artists of the time.

The relationship between architecture and the arts was discussed in one of the annual congresses organised by the Accademia d'Italia.<sup>77</sup> The 1936 Convegno Volta attracted participants of the calibre of Le Corbusier and Willem Marinus Dudok (1884–1974), who debated with Italian architects and artists about the possibilities and nature of arts' potential contribution to architecture. Different positions highlighted a variety of possible approaches, as well as the lack of a coherent strategy. Of course, Le Corbusier's paper attracted the most polemical responses: he confidently stated that architecture did not need the other arts. Opportunities for painters would arise only when 'difficult, inconvenient' elements of the space had to be 'blown up'.<sup>78</sup> After the intervention of an outraged Gino Severini ('the painter will make your wall the most beautiful of the building!'), Pagano elucidated further, downplaying the polemical charge made by the Swiss architect and maintaining that a relationship between modern architecture and the modern arts need not to be excluded in principle. In fact, as seen above, Italian Rationalism rarely excluded decoration.<sup>79</sup> The topic was also the object of an inquest launched in the same year by the magazine *Rassegna di Architettura*.<sup>80</sup> The outcome was once again mixed: architects tended to champion their controlling role, while artists supported a model based on cooperation. A few, more pragmatic professionals admitted that the discussion was pointless, as every case was different. The relationship

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<sup>76</sup> Simonetta Lux, 'Storie diverse', in Monica Pignatti Morano, Nadia di Santo and Paola Refice (eds.), *E42. L'Immagine ritrovata*, (Rome: Palombi, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Carlo Fabrizio Carli, 'Il Convegno Volta 1936', in Vittorio Fagone, Giovanna Ginex, and Tulliola Sparagni (eds.), *Muri ai Pittori*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999), pp. 97–103. The congress was organised by Marcello Piacentini, who became ill days before the opening and was replaced by sculptor Romano Romanelli (1882–1968).

<sup>78</sup> Accademia d'Italia, *VI Convegno Volta: Rapporti dell'architettura con le arti figurative*, (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1936), p. 120, 122.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135, 144.

<sup>80</sup> 'I risultati della nostra inchiesta', *Rassegna di Architettura*, 12 (1936), 444–448, and 1 (1937), 33–36.

between artists and architects, decoration, art, and architecture had to be negotiated every time, to accommodate the complex requirements dictated by the space.

The challenge to the hierarchy of the arts proposed during the 1920s and supported by Marangoni's biennials had failed. Paradoxically, boundaries and divisions were affirmed and even reinforced. On the one hand, architecture was confirmed in its role as 'the major art par excellence, or rather, the mother of all the arts'.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, instead of becoming 'decorators', fine artists had appropriated the genre of monumental painting, informing it with all of the problems typical of easel painting. Margherita Sarfatti noticed that the murals presented at the 1933 Triennial in Milan as 'decorative art', were valued and judged, three years later at the 1936 Venice Biennale, as 'fine art'.<sup>82</sup> These works lacked the essential characteristic of decoration, i.e. the relationship with space; although they had been made using traditional mural techniques such as tempera, fresco, and encaustic, they were nevertheless works of individual self-expression. Because of their 'artisticity', they struggled to adapt themselves to architectural spaces, producing a phenomenon that Romy Golan has brilliantly defined as 'Muralnomad': murals characterised by such a difficult relationship with space that they, literally, experienced nomadic displacement before finding a stable location.<sup>83</sup> To this condition, one should add the numerous episodes of decorative works being contested, whitewashed, covered under curtains, rolled up, and put in storage. This is, in synthesis, the general debate to which Rosso confronted and reacted throughout his career as decorator.

## Conclusion

Rosso 'is a decorator', Carlo A. Felice reminded his readers, while reviewing the *Galleria dei Decoratori* at the Monza triennial of 1930. The critic explained that Rosso's practice was the reason his scheme (analysed in Chapter 5) was the only one worth saving, unlike the disappointing murals by 'painters, I mean habitual painters of paintings'.<sup>84</sup> This

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<sup>81</sup> Sarfatti (1936), 56.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>83</sup> Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: the paradox of wall painting, Europe 1927–1957*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Although I do not agree with some of Golan's interpretations of the nomadic condition of the murals she investigates [in particular, Sironi's mosaic *Il Trionfo di'Italia* (1936–37)], she offers a compelling analysis of the problems that arise when architectural decoration is taken over by fine art painters.

<sup>84</sup> Carlo A. Felice, *Arte Decorativa 1930*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1930), pp. 18–19.

statement by the Secretary of the event is extremely interesting: made in 1930, it perfectly captures the dynamics that characterised a watershed moment, when a fundamental turn in the status of decoration was about to occur. On the one hand, Felice acknowledges the unprecedented involvement of fine artists in decoration; on the other hand, he expresses dissatisfaction that these artists seem unable to engage with a more socially aware practice. As a decorator, Rosso was ideally placed to create harmonious and rejuvenated forms that could express the aspirations of Italian society. The example and teaching of Galileo Chini had been pivotal for Rosso. Chini's use of eclectic references and ability to absorb languages and styles from a broad range of sources, as well as his engagement with both applied arts and mural decoration, were all elements that Rosso appropriated from his master's practice. As I will show in the next chapters, they remained with him long after the influence of Chini's style had developed in something more personal and new.

The context in which Rosso developed his career was extremely complex. Much was expected of decorators, as it was of architects, whose training had supposedly given them the necessary skills to participate in designing modern spaces for modern people. As the balance of private and public patronage began to shift towards the latter, and fine artists increasingly infiltrated in their field of expertise, decorators became caught in the middle of the maelstrom of polemics that would characterize the following decade. For them, the adaptation to architecture was an unavoidable principle of their practice; as Rosso's career demonstrates, they were valued for their ability to interpret the requirements of both spaces and patrons. At the same time, they were also asked to interpret the spiritual and ideological values of a society increasingly marked by Fascism. To accomplish this, they faced competition from artists, for whom involvement in a grand project of architectural decoration was an occasion to try new forms of expression and visual languages. This situation, I believe, instead of convincing artists to learn and accept the rules of decoration, forced decorators to challenge the rules in their own practice. In the next chapters, I will explore Rosso's vast output, showing how he responded to the shifting debate around decoration, and took advantage of opportunities for major expressive freedom, as well as the strategies he adopted when more restrictive conditions were imposed on creativity.

### 3. 'The lute and the thermos flask': towards a modern mural decoration (1921–1927)

*'In the new buildings, a new interior décor. Where the past is missing, we need to create the present. For the modern man, the most interesting history must be the one that originates from and projects him towards the future.'*<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I consider some of Rosso's first commissions as an independent artist, all undertaken between 1921 and 1927 in collaboration with the architect Marcello Piacentini. I will highlight the strategies he used to update the academic tradition he was trained in, while enhancing Piacentini's spaces, and satisfying the expectations of his patrons and audience. Saporì's desire for a new kind of interior décor for new spaces, quoted above, was still a chimera at the end of the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the majority of cases, architects operated within the context of historical cities, and sometimes within pre-existing buildings adapted for new functions (this was the case in three out of the four spaces discussed in this chapter, for which Rosso provided decorative schemes). The past was rarely absent: architects were expected to compromise with the context, and decorators to follow suit, avoiding the 'shock of the new'. Rosso never broke with tradition; rather, he appropriated and challenged it by deploying humour and stylistic solutions borrowed from abroad as a way of achieving a modern style.

To analyse the characteristics of his stylistic choices, it is helpful to draw on and contextualise Rossana Bossaglia's view that Rosso's early works should be framed within Italian Art Deco. Already in 1975, she had noticed that Rosso 'was responsible for some of the most pleasant and witty interior decoration of public places in those years'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, humour was an essential element in Rosso's approach to modern decoration, although one that is problematic to assess. In the view of Margaret A. Rose, whose theories about pictorial irony and parody provide the framework for my analysis, humour can assume diverse forms, depending on the intentions of the humourist and

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<sup>1</sup> Francesco Saporì, 'Le arti applicate in Roma Fascista', *Atti del I Congresso di Studi Romani*, 2 vols., (Rome: Istituto di Studi Romani, 1929), I, pp. 768–771.

<sup>2</sup> A new typology of decoration could not be effectively introduced until the start of the following decade, when rationalist architects began to build. As seen in Chapter 2, photomontage and abstract compositions (together with more traditional forms of decoration) were widely used.

<sup>3</sup> Rossana Bossaglia, *Il "Déco" italiano – fisionomia dello stile 1925 in Italia*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 1975), p. 22.

the perception of the audience.<sup>4</sup> To determine whether Rosso's intentions were ironic, parodic, or satirical, I will analyse his decorative solutions in relation to the typology of space, his public, and the reception of critics and intellectuals of the period.

### 3.1 Between nationalism and leisure: the sgraffiti for the San Paolo Railway Station (1921–22)

In 1921, when Giulio Rosso met Marcello Piacentini, the latter was considered one of the most advanced architects in Italy, and certainly the most talented working in Rome.<sup>5</sup> The son of the prominent architect Pio Piacentini (1846–1928), Marcello established his own practice in 1914, gradually introducing into his architecture elements of the German and Austrian Secessions, which had aroused his enthusiasm during a visit to the Leipzig Architecture Exhibition the previous year.<sup>6</sup> Aiming at a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he constantly involved artists in his projects. After World War I, frequent collaborators included his own wife, the painter Matilde Festa (1890–1957), and sculptors Arturo Dazzi (1881–1966) and Alfredo Biagini (1886–1952). These were all involved in the Roman Secession, which animated the capital's artistic life between 1913 and 1916 and supported a cautious modernism.<sup>7</sup> According to Scarpa, when Rosso was introduced to Piacentini, the architect was struck by his 'free originality' and commissioned the young decorator with the decorative scheme for the San Paolo railway station in Rome.<sup>8</sup> Until that moment, Piacentini had never used mural painting in his modernist architecture, preferring sculpture and the applied arts. In order to win the architect's favour, Rosso must have presented himself as a challenger (but not a destroyer) of the academic approach that still (see Chapter 2) prevented architects

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret A. Rose, *Pictorial Irony, Parody, and Pastiche*, (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Fabrizio Brunetti, *Architetti e Fascismo*, (Florence: Alinea, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> In 1921, Piacentini wrote an extremely well informed article on European architecture, focusing in particular on German architects of modern tendencies. Arianna Sara De Rose, *Marcello Piacentini. Opere 1903–1926*, (Modena: Panini, 1995), p. 41. In 1930, Piacentini followed up his 1920s survey with *Architettura d'Oggi*, (Roma: Cremonese, 1930), which again covered all of the tendencies of European architecture.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Quesada, 'L'arte applicata alle esposizioni romane', in Rossana Bossaglia, Mario Quesada and Pasqualina Spadini (eds.), *Secessione Romana*, (Rome: 1987), pp. 3 and 15–20. The Secessionist annual exhibitions, held in 1913–16, displayed in Rome examples of decorative arts by Dagobert Peche (1887–1923) and the Bund Österreichischer Künstler, and the Russian Mir Iskoussva association. Gloria Raimondi, 'Intorno alla Secessione di Roma: gli artisti tra decorazione e arti applicate', in Maria Catalano et al. (eds.), *Roma 900*, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2015), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> GNAM, Archivio Bioiconografico, fasc. 'Giulio Rosso', Piero Scarpa, 'Giulio Rosso', *Il Messaggero*, 1926; Tridenti writes that the encounter was arranged by Gaetano Rapisardi, who was by then one of the architect's closest assistants. Carlo Tridenti, *La Quirinetta*, (Rome: La Rotografica, 1927), p. 9

engaging with modern forms from using decorative painting. For his first commission, Rosso adapted perfectly to Piacentini's moderate modernism, designing a decorative scheme that blended classical iconography with unusual and popular images, while associating a neo-mannerist graphic stylisation with a humorous take on the genre.

The San Paolo station was the metropolitan end of the railway that connected Rome with the new seaside town of Ostia Nuova. This infrastructure was part of the programme of the Ente per lo Sviluppo Marittimo e Industriale di Roma (SMIR, Office of the Maritime Development of Rome), created in 1919.<sup>9</sup> Its president, engineer Paolo Orlando (1858–1943), designed and supported this programme, although by 1923, when the SMIR was abolished, only part of it had been implemented.<sup>10</sup> Piacentini was involved in planning the new town, providing designs for the local Maritime Hospital and the two stations at the ends of the railway.<sup>11</sup> The foundations of the San Paolo terminal were laid in January 1921, although work on the tracks was still under-way when the SMIR was liquidated.<sup>12</sup> Work resumed in spring 1924 and the line was opened on 11 August 1924 by Benito Mussolini who, in the meantime, had managed to become Italy's Prime Minister.

As the station was the terminal of a secondary urban line, Piacentini's design had a rather diminutive exterior aspect. It tried to balance classical references inspired by the location – facing the ancient *Porta Ostiensis* (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., later Porta San Paolo) and Caio Cestio's Pyramid (12 B.C.) – and modern functionality. Simplified classical features, such as a large pediment surmounting a portico and rusticated masonry along the base coexisted with travertine spheres and lined plaster surfaces, adding a flavour of Viennese Secession. The walls of the large ticket hall featured a stucco cornice interspersed with crab-shaped reliefs, under which Giulio Rosso designed eleven sgraffito panels, plus four along the two corridors leading to the platforms (fig. 3.1). The use of the sgraffito technique was particularly appropriate, because the space, which

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<sup>9</sup> The programme involved building a coastal town (Ostia Nuova), an industrial port, an artificial canal running parallel to the Tiber up to Saint Paul's Basilica toward urban docks and wharves, a new quarter for dock workers on the hill of the Garbatella, and an industrial estate along the via Ostiense. Only the new town, the Garbatella quarter, and the railway were completed.

<sup>10</sup> Paolo Orlando, *Alla conquista del mare di Roma*, (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni, 1941).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639.

<sup>12</sup> Archivio Storico Capitolino (ASC), Archivio Paolo Orlando, Carteggio, B. 3, fasc. 14, photograph *Stazione di Porta San Paolo - Lavori di fondazione – 28 Gennaio 1921*. The Ostia Lido station, was bombed in 1944.



opened directly onto the exterior, had no protection from weather conditions.<sup>13</sup> Rosso was familiar with prominent examples of mural sgraffiti in Florence; in addition, his experience in the Quartiere Coppedè had provided him with the necessary skills.<sup>14</sup>

The coastal destination of the railway suggested the marine theme of the scheme. In the individual scenes, which are not part of a general narrative, classical imagery is mixed with novel iconographies, echoing Piacentini's approach in the design of the space. The panels above the entrance represent a marine *Thiasos*, the procession of Neptune, flanked in the central panel by two groups of three putti carrying nets full of fishes (fig. 3.2). The god is accompanied by a Nereid and Nerites, their only brother, shown playing with hybrid sea creatures in the small panels above the side doors (figs. 3.3, 3.4). On the two sidewalls, the iconography shifts towards popular culture and legends. Two larger panels represent two pairs of fishermen, standing and sitting. The standing pair holds a mermaid in a net; although this is a frequent subject of folk tales, it is rarely found in decorative schemes for public spaces (fig. 3.5). The sitting pair, one grabbing a fish at the end of his rod and the other asleep, with a closed basket between them, suggest the popular proverb '*chi dorme non piglia pesci*' (who sleeps does not catch fish) (fig. 3.6). Four smaller panels, two on the sidewalls and two on the walls of the ticket counter, present a variation on the classical motif of putti. They parade a swordfish and models of ships (figs. 3.7, 3.8), surf the waves with sails (inflated by a three-faced representation of the winds) tied to their ankles, and fill a net with fishes under a flower-shaped sun shining in the sky (figs. 3.9, 3.10).

The themes of the four rectangular panels along two side corridors are even more unusual. In the east corridor, a panel shows three mermaids escaping from an approaching boat; a putto chases them with a torch (the rising sun is represented behind him) (fig. 3.11). Another panel shows three girls lying on sailboats pushed by winds blown by swollen-cheeked heads (fig. 3.12), a Renaissance iconography of good Fortune. In the west corridor, one panel represents a mermaid chased by a centaur, (fig. 3.13).

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<sup>13</sup> Sgraffito has been used in mural and ceramic decoration since classical times; it was very popular in sixteenth century Florence. Its use might have been suggested by the architect Giorgio Wenter Marini (1890–1973), who was Piacentini's assistant at the time of the commission. In his later works, he often introduced sgraffito decorations (the Church of the Sant'Isidoro Institute in Trento, 1921–22). De Rose (1995), pp. 13–15. Sgraffiti decorated also the ceiling of the portico surrounding Piacentini's piazza Vittorio Veneto in Bergamo (1922 ca); their design recall Rosso's decorative motifs.

<sup>14</sup> In 1995, the sgraffiti underwent a restorative intervention, during which a rough reconstruction of lost areas was carried out.

On the opposite side, a two-tailed triton lifts a clam shell full of a sea harvest, while flanked by leaping baby tritons (fig. 3.14). Here, the themes evoke a medieval motif (although the centaur is armed with a trident and, very strangely, swims in the sea) and a favourite theme of Baroque fountain sculpture, of which the most obvious model is Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Fontana del Tritone* (1642–43).

Vania Ribeca has linked Rosso's iconographic choices with the mosaics then emerging from the archaeological excavations begun in 1919 in the ancient town of Ostia.<sup>15</sup> Yet, although marine subjects often feature in the mosaic floors of the ancient harbour-town, there is no thematic, let alone stylistic, correspondence between them and Rosso's sgraffiti. In fact, the words on a square plaque in the ticket hall provide a more intriguing reference, although they shed light on the expectations that underpinned the scheme rather than clarify its iconography. The plaque reads:

‘Con me stirpe ferace che t'accingi / nova a riprofondare la traccia antica / in cui te stessa ed il tuo fato attingi.

La Canzone d'Oltremare (Gabriele D'Annunzio), L'Ente Autonomo per lo Sviluppo Marittimo e Industriale di Roma, 6 Aprile 1923'.<sup>16</sup>

*La Canzone d'Oltremare* (The Overseas Song), from which these verses are taken, is the first poem in the collection *Merope*, published in 1912 by the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio.<sup>17</sup> The song is an ode to the colonial conquest of Libya and the Dodecanese, achieved after the war between Italy and Turkey (November 1911–October 1912). The collection, received initially with indifference and hostility, went through four successive editions as soon as Italy declared war on Austria (1915). D'Annunzio's flamboyant wartime actions made him an icon for the *Irredentisti*, who wanted to bring Italian-speaking regions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under the control of the Italian Kingdom. The *Canto* is a typical product of D'Annunzio's cultural and aesthetic

<sup>15</sup> Vania Ribeca, 'La ferrovia Roma-Ostia e la stazione di Porta San Paolo', in Enrica Torelli Landini (ed.), *Roma, memorie della città industriale*, (Rome: Palombi, 2007), pp. 32–39.

<sup>16</sup> With me, fertile race, which renewed are about / to retrace the ancient track / in which you draw yourself and your destiny.

<sup>17</sup> It was the fourth book of the *Laudi del cielo, del mare, della terra, degli eroi* (Odes to the sky, the sea, the earth, the heroes), originally planned as seven books, each dedicated to one star in the constellation of the Pleiades. D'Annunzio wrote only five: *Maia*, *Elettra*, and *Alcyone* (published in 1903); *Merope* (1912); *Asterope* (1918).

nationalism.<sup>18</sup> In the verses on the plaque, Victory addresses the Italian people, reminding them that there is no break between the Roman past and their future: they are destined to return to where imperial legions once stood. Shifting incessantly from history to myth, the poet anticipates strategies that Fascism would implement in its later propaganda.

Among the whirlpool of images blended together in the rest of the poem, some recall Rosso's scenes. The naked putti, for example, suggest the poet's image of a new race launched into the imperialist enterprise. Indeed, one of the birds flying above them (fig. 3.7) recalls the petrel whose singing reminded the poet of the cry of the imperial eagle (verses 10–11), conjuring a vision of prows sailing south (v. 13), like the ships paraded by putti on the opposite wall (fig. 3.8). The putto holding a torch and chasing mermaids (fig. 3.11) potentially evokes the conquest, in which Italy exorcises the decadence of the pre-Risorgimento period by killing the last mermaid in the gulf of Sirte (v. 29–30). The contrast between torch/sun versus the bestial mermaids/obscure abyss of the oceans might be a symbolic representation of D'Annunzio's myth of the civilizing mission of Italian troops. Opposite is the image of young women on boats (fig 3.12); in D'Annunzio's poem, Victory tells how she waited patiently in Ostia, looking at the Tiber's mouth and expecting the boat of Fortune to enter the river (v. 105). It is important to note that D'Annunzio's 'enterprise', i.e. the claim and military occupation of the border town of Fiume in September 1919 (passionately supported by public opinion), finally ended in January 1921, when, as seen, work on the building had just started.<sup>19</sup>

However, the date on the plaque shows that it was installed after the SMIR was abolished (1923), months after Rosso completed his decorative scheme, probably before 10 May 1922, when Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti visited the structure.<sup>20</sup> I believe that this plaque reveals the cultural references of the man behind the commission, Paolo Orlando, rather than providing a direct thematic source for the scheme. This is crucial for understanding Rosso's 'brief' and how he responded to it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fabrizio Caburlotto, 'D'Annunzio, la latinità del Mediterraneo e il mito della riconquista', *California Italian Studies*, 1 (2010), 2–3.

<sup>19</sup> The Treaty of Rapallo between the Kingdoms of Italy and Yugoslavia (November 1920) granted Fiume the status of a free town. In December 1920, the Italian Navy started to bomb the town. D'Annunzio and his legionaries surrendered a month later.

<sup>20</sup> Orlando (1941), pp. 235, 238.

<sup>21</sup> See the Introduction for my explanation of the concept of 'brief', borrowed by Michael Baxandall.

At least on an iconographic level, D'Annunzio and Rosso shared a common imagery, one that was often used by Orlando to express his own highly idealistic sense of the mission of the SMIR – in his own words: 'to renew the sea fortunes of ancient Rome and to boost fruitful activities of works.'<sup>22</sup> Again, the myth of Rome and the modern ideal of productivity intersected. The recurrence of full nets, waters teeming with fish, cornucopias, and sea harvests in Rosso's sgraffiti recall Orlando and D'Annunzio's rhetoric of the '*quarta sponda*' (fourth shore), the Libyan colony where masses of Italian emigrants could find new opportunities for economic prosperity. At the same time, the deities and ships with *rostra* evoke the glories of Roman conquests, a source of legitimisation for the imperialist goals of the nationalists.

However, there is also a substantial difference between D'Annunzio and Rosso's narratives. If Rosso did refer to *La Canzone d'Oltremare*, he translated D'Annunzio's militaristic visions into a marine extravaganza, i.e. 'the whimsical treatment of a poetical subject'.<sup>23</sup> The swords are turned into a swordfish and Trojan ships into toy boats. Neptune's majesty is almost overthrown by the dolphin sneaking under his left leg. The mermaids do not seem to fear the advancing light of progress – even the one caught in a net smiles cheekily at her capturers. Rosso took the materials of symbolist nationalistic literature and shifted them in the direction of popular culture. The effect is similar to that of another product of the colonial enterprise: the song *A Tripoli* (To Tripoli; text by Giovanni Corvetto, music by Colombino Arona, 1911). Although the title appears to encourage colonial imperialism, it was the sentimental and erotic subtext that contributed to its success: so much so that it was (and still is) known as *Tripoli bel suol d'amore* (Tripoli, beautiful land of love). The sense of gaiety and light-heartedness that pervades Rosso's entire decorative scheme undermines the rhetoric of conquest with which Orlando's nationalism and D'Annunzio's poetry were infused. In the face of the sombre symbolic meanings they are meant to embody, Rosso's creatures laugh resonantly, less preoccupied with the rhetoric of progress and conquest than with a more down-to-earth celebration of leisure. In fact, the potential of Ostia as a seaside resort was under consideration since the start of the planning process. Already in 1923,

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<sup>22</sup> These words were written on the commemorative parchment offered by the Senator to the King when the first stone of the railway was laid on 30 December 1918. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>23</sup> The definition by James Planché (1796–1880) is quoted in John Michael Cooper, *Historical Dictionary of Romantic Music*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), p. 198.

MP Luigi Rava (1860–1938) offered a rather pragmatic motivation for relaunching the railway, while denouncing its state of neglect:

'You can be sure that the railway will be profitable in all seasons [...] And really, having the chance [...] to see the ancient commercial city of Ostia, with its stores, its shops, theatre, its temples dedicated to the various religions of the sailors who gathered at the sacred Tiber is going to be very attractive for foreigners. Moreover, the population of Rome feels a need for the sea and seeks it out, with its numerous and flourishing children'.<sup>24</sup>

Ostia did indeed become the city's most popular weekend destination, and the railway was the most convenient way for local middle and lower-middle class people to get there.

Rosso responded to the complex mingling of symbolic meanings and expectations implicit in such a project by blending references to both high and low culture. This eclectic approach was mirrored in his plural stylistic choices. For his first work as a professional decorator, Rosso drew on motifs he had used in the Quartiere Coppedè (Chapter 2). His playful putti, a Renaissance motif that continued to be popular among decorative artists, recall Galileo Chini's recurring putti in procession, holding garlands, ribbons, and musical instruments (figs. 3.15, 3.16).<sup>25</sup> Similarities can also be found with Chini's 1920 scheme for the Central Hall of the Venice Biennale (fig. 3.17), which featured horizontal panels representing naked figures in expressive poses, flying in a red and blue sky and carrying symbols of the Italian army's different regiments, in celebration of the 1918 victory. Veils envelop their bodies or swell in the wind as they do in Rosso's representations of mermaids and putti (figs. 3.10, 3.11, 3.13). In the Venice panels there is also a certain simplification of forms that must have appealed to Rosso. Indeed, the young artist played with the graphic nature of the sgraffito technique, minimizing shadows and nuances, and enhancing the sensuous linearism of the engraved signs. The proportions of the figures are gently stretched, with neo-mannerist elegance, while the backgrounds are filled with small, abstract patterns that enhance the flat quality of the decoration. Chini often looked abroad for stylistic novelties.

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<sup>24</sup> Orlando (1941), p. 401.

<sup>25</sup> Augusto Garneri, *L'Ornato: Vademecum per Architetti, Calligrafi, Ceramisti, Pittori, Scultori ecc.*, (Florence: Prof. A. Garneri, 1921), pp. 204–207.

Similarly, Rosso's graphic forms suggest a familiarity with contemporary French illustrators and German decorative artists, whose work might have been pointed out by Piacentini. In particular, he might have considered works by Eduard Pfeiffer (1889–1929), such as the cover of the magazine *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (showing a putto similar to Rosso's, with long curly hair) or the plasterwork for the *Jungmühle Kabarett* in Dortmund (1913) (figs. 3.19, 3.20).<sup>26</sup> These cautious stylistic novelties, coupled with Rosso's ironic register (a general feature of his decoration discussed below), resulted in a decorative scheme for a public space that was altogether unusual for the period.

### 3.2 Decorations for modern spaces of entertainment: the *Tabarin* Savoia (1922) and the Quirinetta restaurant (1924–25)

The scheme for the San Paolo station anticipated some of Rosso's preferred strategies for updating the tradition of mural decoration: eclecticism of sources, references to both high and low culture, humorous re-interpretation of themes, and stylisation of forms inspired by tendencies developing abroad. This formula perfectly suited Piacentini's architecture. Rosso became his favourite decorator, almost constantly involved in the architect's projects (including one of his own houses) until 1927.<sup>27</sup> However, it must be noted that for both the Casa Madre dei Mutilati di Guerra (1925–1928) and the Hotel Ambasciatori (1927) in Rome, his most prestigious projects of the period, Piacentini chose other decorators.

In the former, an architectural expression of the care that the new-born fascist regime had for the wounded soldiers of World War I, the wall paintings were provided by Antonio Giuseppe Santagata (1888–1985).<sup>28</sup> In the latter, the most modern addition to the Rome's international luxury hotels, Guido Cadorin (1892–1976) painted a glamorous party of jet-setting guests. Considering how Rosso had 'treated' the classical

<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm Michael, 'Eduard Pfeiffer und sein Kabarett "Jungmühle" in Dortmund', *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 33 (1913–14), 42–60.

<sup>27</sup> A drawing by Rosso representing an allegorical gathering of personifications of the arts, made in 1923, is still in the private collection of Piacentini's nephew. The communication of Professor Roberto Dulio, 08/02/2016.

<sup>28</sup> Rosanna Barbiellini Amidei et al., *La Casa Madre dei Mutilati di Guerra*, (Rome: Editalia, 1993), pp. 105–142. The Casa Madre was built in two phases: 1926–28 and 1935–38. During the latter, Santagata was joined by Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Carlo Socrate (1889–1967) and Mario Sironi. During the first phase, Edoardo Del Neri (1890–1932) designed the wooden marquetry in the *Parlamentino* (Assembly hall).

iconography in San Paolo station, Piacentini must have reckoned that his humorous, popular style was more appropriate for public spaces associated with leisure activities and destinations. The ceilings and walls of a dance hall attached to a theatre in Florence and a Roman restaurant would be Rosso's next challenges. The decorator did not disappoint; unlike Cadarin's scheme in the Hotel Ambasciatori, which had to be whitewashed, his schemes were highly acclaimed.<sup>29</sup> Rosso's dreamy urban and bucolic scenes gave these new and popular recreation spaces an escapist setting. References to traditional repertoires, unavoidable in the context of a provincial location, were mixed with allusions to contemporaneity, entertaining observers, while also gently teasing them.

Piacentini differentiated also between the artists he chose to collaborate with him on the Savoia Theatre in Florence (1922), highlighting the architect's role as coordinator of decorative interventions.<sup>30</sup> For the above-ground theatre, his wife Matilde Festa designed the wall tapestries, Lorenza Agresti the stage curtain, the Barsi company the wood chandeliers, Giuseppe Gronchi (1882–1944) the stucco decorations, Bernardo Morescalchi (1895–1975) the external lantern, and the Quentin company the stained glass windows. Sculptor Antonio Maraini decorated the pediment of the proscenium with three figures on corbels representing an actress looking at, wearing, and removing a mask. They were located above an inscription of the famous verses by Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449–1492) from the *Canti Carnascialeschi* (Carnival Songs, 15th century): 'chi vuol esser lieto sia / di doman non c'è certezza' (Let he who wishes, enjoy / Nothing's certain tomorrow). For the *tabarin* (cabaret/dancing hall) in the basement, where a different kind of show would take place, the wall and ceiling paintings were designed by Giulio Rosso.<sup>31</sup>

On two beamed ceilings, Rosso created a celebration of pantomime, circus, and cinema. Against a reticule of fictive coffers with rosettes, fantastic characters formed two ring-a-ring-o' roses among the clouds, evoking the magic of the shows that would be staged

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<sup>29</sup> Cadarin was commissioned to design a scheme that would 'evoke the style of eighteenth century Venice'. Instead, the artist decided to depict a gathering of contemporary members of the cultural and social elite, resulting in endless polemics. Rossana Bossaglia and Giandomenico Romanelli (eds.), *Guido Cadarin*, (Milan: Electa, 1987), p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> Marcello Piacentini was commissioned by the Società Immobiliare Toscana (SIT) to design the Savoia Theatre in 1920. It was built inside the walls of a Renaissance palace called Strozzi. Mario Tinti, *Il Teatro Savoia in Firenze*, (Milan: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1922).

<sup>31</sup> These scenes, now lost, were photographed, although probably only partially.

in the venue above and the *tabarin* itself (figs. 3.20, 3.21). The two circular processions featured an extremely heterogeneous array of figures: exotic animals and vegetation, playing putti, a Russian ballet dancer, a classical female nude, characters dressed in eighteenth and nineteenth century robes, a contemporary diva at her dressing table, a girl picking petals off a daisy in the popular game of '*m'ama - non m'ama*' (he loves me - he loves me not), and an old man possibly flirting with a young woman. They coexisted without any apparent link, aside from the fact that they were characters from popular vaudeville and pantomime shows, and from the cinema and humorous literature of the time.

In contrast to the imaginative exuberance of the ceiling, the scenes on the walls celebrated the earthly delights of dancing, drinking, and eating. Pierrot played the violin while Columbine danced in a village *piazza* (fig. 3.22). In a vineyard, with the hilly Tuscan countryside in the background (fig. 3.23), a young peasant girl carried a chest full of grapes, while on the opposite side, a boy gave a toast raising his glass to the sky; in the middle, a putto sat astride a barrel from which wine poured copiously. The background of another scene (fig. 3.24) showed the roof terrace of a restaurant named '*Laria*' (the air), where diners ate alfresco. On the right-hand side, a massive and slightly grim-looking cook was decorating a cake; as the smoke from his kitchen mounted, a vision appeared: a pair of putti carrying a suckling pig on a spit in a triumphal procession, accompanied by four roast quails. On the left-hand side, a waiter with a 1920s hairstyle and clothes poured wine into the glass of a potbellied diner wearing a Roman toga and a crown of laurel. This was no less than Lucio Licinio Lucullo (117–56 B.C.), the Roman consul celebrated by Cicero and Plutarch for his passion for food, from which the adjective '*luculliano*' (commonly used in Italian to define a particularly rich meal) derives. He participated in the feast, certifying the quality of the venue.

It was not unusual for theatre decoration to refer to characters and stories performed on the stage. A notable example was the scheme *Figures d'Opéra*, which Maurice Denis (1870–1943) created for the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1913 (fig. 3.25). Rosso engaged with the genre as he had done with the classical iconography in the San Paolo station: by using a popular register. The powerful heroes and tragic heroines of the Opera were replaced with extravagant characters from the vaudeville, avant-garde ballet, and cinema, familiar to the artist and the public, and, crucially, also to the patron



Alessandro Aboaff (Vice-President of the filmmaking company Visioni Italiane Storiche). On 30 April 1917, when Rosso was still living in Florence, the Ballets Russes performed *Les Femmes de Bonne Humour* in the city.<sup>32</sup> The original piece by Carlo Goldoni (1707–1793), set in Venice during the Carnival, gave costume designer Léon Bakst (1866–1924) an opportunity to reinvent the traditional masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. This form of theatre based on improvisation, had been popular in Europe, especially Italy, Spain, and France, in the seventeenth century. It had been recently rediscovered, becoming extremely popular among artists working in Paris during the 'Return to order' years of 1915–1920 as a source of types and characters. Rosso's dancing masks are a response to the contemporary craze for the *Commedia*.

However, Rosso seems less preoccupied with Severini and Picasso's melancholic *Pulcinella* than with the sensuous and glamorous Columbine and Harlequin of the illustrators working for French fashion magazines, such as Umberto Brunelleschi (1879–1949), Eduardo Garcia Benito (1881–1891), and George Barbier (1889–1932). In his 'Mythologie Galante' series for *La vie Parisienne*, Barbier represented goddesses and gods in eighteenth century (un)dress (fig. 3.26). Instead of using Rococo imagery, Rosso projected his young Bacchus and potbellied Lucullus into contemporary settings, enhancing the humorous effect. The diva herself, like the characters she plays, was immortalised at her toilette (as if appearing in a glamorous magazine), celebrated in her new status as a cult object for cinemagoers. The *tabarin* was decorated to satisfy the expectations of its audience. It was 'a fashionable place to gather and to pass the time, [which] allowed the petit bourgeoisie, for a limited fee, to hobnob, to take part in a *beau monde* event.'<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, cinema stars, masks, and popular characters pandered to the costumers' desire for escapism. In this work, Rosso empathised with the public and boosted his audience's cheerful mood.

Escapism and empathy were also main ingredients in the schemes that Rosso designed for the Quirinetta Restaurant and Theatre (opened in 1927).<sup>34</sup> The restaurant consisted of six spaces of different dimensions, each characterised by a different decorative

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<sup>32</sup> 'I Balli Russi al Politeama', *La Nazione*, 29/04/1917, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Riccardo Castellacci, 'Multiversum and Nonsynchronism (Ungleichzeitigkeit): Temples of Distraction in Florence in the Twenties', in Enrico Biasin, Roy Menarini and Federico Zecca (eds.), *The Ages of Cinema* (Udine: Forum, 2008), p. 182.

<sup>34</sup> Piacentini was commissioned to refurbish the basement of the Quirino Theatre in Rome in 1920. The Quirinetta restaurant and small theatre opened on 2 February 1927. De Rose (1995), pp. 147–148.

scheme. Sculptor Alfredo Biagini was asked to design the Halls of Bacchus, Venus, Stuccos, and the Etruscans. Giulio Rosso was in charge of the painted decorations for one of the restaurant's rooms, the Hall of the Good Old Days, a vestibule called Hall of Cheerfulness, and the small theatre, all carried out during 1924–25.<sup>35</sup> The overall theme of the restaurant aimed to provide a visual *divertissement* where diners, according to their wishes, could find themselves immersed in different epochs. Carlo Tridenti compared Rosso's ability to manage several different styles at once to that of a 'jovial juggler'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Rosso's schemes for the Quirinetta represented a *tour de force* through different languages, epochs and genres of decoration, each appropriated and re-invented in accordance with the aim of the space: to entertain.

In the Hall of the Good Old Days, scenes recalled the themes, settings, and atmosphere of decorative prints from the European Restoration period (figs. 3.27–3.35). A photograph of the cartoon of *The Banquet*, in the artist's archive (fig. 3.36), has an autograph label that identifies it as an illustration for the *Reisebilder* (Travel Pictures), a series of travel books written by Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) between 1826 and 1829. Although the third book tells of Heine's journey through northern Italy and Tuscany, there is no direct connection between the scenes painted by Rosso and Heine's account, nor do any contemporary Italian editions of Heine's work have illustrations.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the Good Old Days scheme should not be intended as a literal illustration of Heine's novel, but as a *hommage* to the atmosphere and literary vignettes created by 'the most ironic of poets'.<sup>38</sup> As he did with the sgraffiti in the San Paolo station, Rosso reworked the text, adapting it to suit the space and fulfil its decorative function. He appropriated Heine's humorous register, but left behind his social and political criticism. The sketches present post-Napoleonic life as a picturesque sequence of parties, pageantry, and courtships. The small scenes recall motifs used in eighteenth century girandoles (fig. 3.37), or "print room" wallpapers, featuring vignettes with landscapes, picturesque ruins, and *fête*

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<sup>35</sup> Giuseppe Zucca, 'Li Frati i un Paese', *L'Epoca*, 15/11/1925, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Tridenti (1927), p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Reisebilder*, (Florence: Vallecchi, 1922); Heinrich Heine, *Reisebilder*, (Milan: Treves, 1927).

<sup>38</sup> Charles S. Brauner, 'Irony in the Heine Lieder of Schubert and Schumann', *The Musical Quarterly*, 2 (1981), 261.

*galante*, a type of landscape painting devised by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), in which young lovers are shown in idealised natural setting (fig. 3.38).<sup>39</sup>

In the Hall of Cheerfulness, Rosso used genre scenes to focus on hilarious episodes and stereotypes, exposing their ambiguous nature through contrasting visual messages (figs. 3.39–3.43). For instance, relationships between men and women are imbued with the Italian male chauvinism of the time: men are jovial fellows (or elegant snobs), dedicated to the pleasures of partying, eating, drinking, and seducing; women are their objects of desire, mothers, or devoted and responsible workers. Only the latter gaze with complicity at the viewer, establishing a visual conversation based on empathy with female diners (figs. 3.39, 3.40). Rosso also plays with the contrast between city and countryside. Urban glamour (a monocle, cigarette holder, and fedora hat) is set against the simplicity of rural life: the washerwomen at the river being ogled by a passer-by (fig. 3.40). The contrast echoed the polemics between contemporary literary tendencies known as *Strapaese* and *Stracittà*. The former, championed by magazines such as *L'Italiano* (1926) by Leo Longanesi (1905–1957) and *Il Selvaggio* (1924, re-founded in 1927) by Mino Maccari (1898–1989), aimed to 'defend the rural character of the Italian people [...] against the invasion of fashions, foreign thoughts, and modernist civilisations, because they threaten to repress, poison and destroy the qualities of Italian people'.<sup>40</sup> The latter was supported by *900. Cahiers d'Italie et d'Europe*, established by Massimo Bontempelli in 1926. This contrast reflected the tensions present in a cultural context torn between embracing a modernity considered 'foreign' and relying on local but exhausted models. This debate must have resonated with Rosso, who was aware of the Tuscan raw and folkloric regionalism that pervaded Maccari and Soffici's *Strapaese*. At the same time, the modern decoration he was after, and the clientele he targeted, prompted him to look at urban elegance and foreign examples.<sup>41</sup>

This tension is evident in the Hall of Cheerfulness. The scenes of a grape harvest (fig. 3.43) and village life (the man defending a child from an inquisitive couple showing an empty bowl, fig. 3.42; the couple looking worried about the bill for their meal, fig. 3.39) demonstrate Rosso's passion for the virtually infinite repertoire of humorous and tender

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<sup>39</sup> Joanne Kosuda-Warner, *Landscape Wallcoverings*, (London: Scala, 2001), p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Orco Bisorco (Mino Maccari), 'Gazzettino Ufficiale di Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 9 (1927), 61.

<sup>41</sup> Rossana Bossaglia, *Il Novecento Italiano*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), p. 22

situations that rural life could offer. Even the party of citizens is depicted escaping from the city to find refuge in nature. Yet, from an iconographic and stylistic point of view, it is clear that Rosso is interested in modern re-elaborations of the tradition. The picnic scene (fig. 3.39), for instance, recalls *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) by Édouard Manet (1832–1883) and its many impressionist heirs projecting classical iconographies into modernity. At the same time, his stylised figures look like softer versions of those by the French artists Jean Théodore Dupas (1882–1964) (fig. 3.44) and Louis Süe (1875–1968). Dupas achieved widespread success at the 1925 Paris *Exposition Internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* with decorative panels including *Les Perruches* and *La vigne et le vin*. Rosso, by borrowing Dupas' mannered style, confers a modern character on his images, making them suitable for his urban audience but not too edgy for its provincial tastes.

In designing a banner for the restaurant, Rosso pushed his design towards more experimental ends. Its theme represented a quintessentially Art Deco subject: a young woman in eighteenth/early nineteenth century dress, with a top hat, carrying a basket full of fruit and running next to a doe with a tassel around the neck. Here, while probably paying homage to the 1925 Paris exhibition poster by Robert Bonfils (1886–1972) (fig. 3.45), Rosso flattened the composition, played with abstract signs, and referenced the enigmatic eyes without pupils typical of figures by Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920) (fig. 3.46). Such choices can be explained by considering the object, its use and function. The banner was placed above stairs leading into the restaurant from the street level entrance. Thus, it was a mobile item that did not ask to be 'read' by diners waiting for their food to be served; rather, it had to catch the attention of passers-by, and it did so thanks to its striking modern design.

The theatre (fig. 3.47) featured motifs inspired by trompe l'oeil murals typical of ancient Roman Fourth Style painting (fig. 3.51), as well as the Renaissance perspective *tarsie* (inlay work) often used in church choirs (fig. 3.52) or in so-called *studioli*. These two genres of decoration shared a common feature: they constructed an illusory space where symbolic objects or small genre scenes could be placed: they functioned as fantastic theatrical stages, where static and mysterious plays (to a contemporary lay observer) were performed. In Rosso's slender puppet theatres, strange visual rebuses play on the interference between antiquity and modernity. A candelabra and a book are

associated with a cigarette on an ashtray and a liquor glass, a bunch of flowers with the Christological attributes of the goblet and dices (figs. 3.48, 3.49). The design of the fictive architectural settings depended on the position in the room: those on the sidewalls look like frail constructions of lines (fig. 3.50), while those on the apse break through the wall convincingly, dialoguing with real niches holding Murano glass vases. The classical divinities inhabiting these spaces are turned into porcelain Art Deco statuettes modelled on those reinvented by Gio Ponti (1891–1979) during his activity as designer for Richard-Ginori (1922–33) (fig. 3.53). Again, the blossoming motifs between the niches, borrowed from Renaissance Florentine fabrics, ceramics, and interiors of nuptial *cassoni*, are geometrised in the style of Wiener Werkstatte designer Dagobert Peche (fig. 3.54) and, above all, Hungarian architect Lajos (Ludwig) Kozma (1884–1948), whose graphic inventions had a lasting influence on Rosso (fig. 3.55).

### 3.3 Rosso's decoration: a humorous re-interpretation of eclectic references

In his previously cited 1927 article, Eugenio Giovannetti quoted the only known official statement by Rosso about his art. The young artist declared that he was 'not interested in the painting to be hung on the wall, but rather in the interaction with architecture, following, *at least in this*, the example of the ancient masters' [italics mine].<sup>42</sup> Rosso proudly declared his status as a decorator and his position in the continuity of a prestigious tradition. Indeed, Rosso made his exordium in a climate that, as discussed in Chapter 2, had seen Giorgio de Chirico advocating a 'Return to Craft', following the 'revelation' he received while visiting museums and galleries in Rome.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, with the words 'at least in this', Rosso enriched his declaration of conformity by suggesting a distinction. The extent and modality of this distinction were evident to his contemporaries, as the reception of his early works clearly shows.

The scheme for the Florence *tabarin* was the first of Rosso's works to be reviewed.<sup>44</sup> Mario Tinti, in *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, admired Rosso's 'fantastic, bizarre, and

<sup>42</sup> Eugenio Giovannetti, 'Il pittore dell'allegria', *Il Piccolo*, 20/04/1927, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Salvatore Vacanti, 'Giorgio de Chirico e il "Ritorno al Mestiere"', *Metafisica*, 5–6 (2006), 418–419.

<sup>44</sup> There is no record of any comment about the San Paolo Station, in either Rosso's or Piacentini's archives. The Fondo Piacentini at the Archivio della Facoltà di Architettura dell'Università di Firenze (AFAUF) contains only one picture of the exterior of the Ostia Lido station. Commentators such as Scarpa and Tridenti only refer to the work as Rosso's first. It is never mentioned in the anonymous 1930 article that recalls the artist's activity, or in the decorator's various draft CVs now kept in his archive. 'Attività di Giulio Rosso', *L'Almanacco degli artisti – il vero Giotto*, (Rome: Palombi, 1930), p. 280.

funny scenes, which blended elegance and caricature', and highlighted how they were inspired by 'a new taste'.<sup>45</sup> According to Scarpa, Rosso was 'not an artist of style', meaning that, since mural art had to conform to the characteristics of architecture, he was able to reference different styles in different spaces. The critic appreciated the intellectual confidence with which the decorator interpreted each space. Rosso's art, 'consistent with our time of dynamic fervour of works, is agile, light, and delicious'.<sup>46</sup> When the critic reviewed the Quirinetta in 1927, he highlighted the 'refined humour' and 'sarcasm that stems from observing the popular and aristocratic environments he frequents'.<sup>47</sup> A 'marked vein tending to caricature' was also evident to Arturo Lancellotti, who noticed the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the ensemble, and defined both the design by Piacentini and that of Rosso as 'very secessionist'.<sup>48</sup> By using this adjective, the critic must have meant Piacentini, Biagini and Rosso's references to the Austrian modern designers promoted through Roman Secession exhibitions until 1920.<sup>49</sup>

Reviews of the *Quirinetta*, while gaining Rosso his initial success (an anonymous journalist writing in *Il Tevere* described him as a 'newcomer and already crowned prince of the kingdom of the decorators'), exposed the uncertainties of Italian critique.<sup>50</sup> Yoï Maraini, reporting in *The Sphere* on 'the brilliant decorative work now being carried out by the younger school of Italian architects and decorators', presented the scenes in the Hall of Cheerfulness as a 'modern pastoral', which included 'both the lute and the thermos flask'.<sup>51</sup> This critic, who belonged to the cosmopolitan elite, with contacts all over Europe and the USA, must have appreciated how 'the amusing style' currently in vogue in Britain was catching on also in Italy.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, Renato Pacini writing in *La Stirpe*, rejected this scheme as 'not Italian enough', revealing a growing preoccupation with a nationalist assessment of the arts. However, he celebrated Rosso's

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<sup>45</sup> Mario Tinti, 'Il cinema-teatro Savoia a Firenze', *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 6 (1923), 214–215.

<sup>46</sup> GNAM, Scarpa (1926).

<sup>47</sup> Piero Scarpa, 'Un Gioiello d'Arte: 'La Quirinetta'', *Il Meridiano*, 07/02/1927, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> AGR, press clippings, Arturo Lancellotti, 'Moderni ritrovi romani. La Quirinetta di Roma', *La Casa Bella*, (1928).

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 2, footnote 62. In 1923, De Chirico published his *Piccolo Trattato di Tecnica Pittorica* (little treatise of pictorial technique), a copy of which was in Giulio Rosso's library (now in AGR).

<sup>50</sup> 'Alla Quirinetta', *Il Tevere*, 20/04/1927, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Yoï Maraini, 'Brilliant Decorative Art in Modern Italy', *The Sphere*, 25/08/1928, p. 354.

<sup>52</sup> In Britain, works that were very similar to Rosso's were designed by Mary Adshead (1904–1995) (*An English Holiday*, Calvin Lodge, Newmarket, 1928), Edward Bawden (1903–1989), Eric Ravilious (1903–1942) and Archibald Ziegler (1903–1971). Christopher Reed's definition of 'amusing style' is quoted from the section on 'Frivolity' in Alan Powers, *British Murals & Decorative Painting 1920–1960*, (Bristol: Sanson & Co., 2013), p. 99 (92–104).

achievements in the other spaces of the Quirinetta, highlighting the new and modern typology of the grotesque that the decorator had invented by drawing on nineteenth century art as Renaissance artists used classical heritage. Pacini was confident that this approach, which was rooted in a national tradition and had the confidence to reinvent it, could be the answer to the question of how to modernise the Italian decorative arts.<sup>53</sup>

Nationalist preoccupations aside, the critics unanimously underlined the eclecticism of Rosso's decorative work, while labelling it 'modern' because of its humour and stylised forms. His ability to reference different traditions and his awareness of foreign trends integrated perfectly with Piacentini's architecture, which scholars such as Mario Lupano and Alessandra Muntoni have shown to be fundamentally eclectic.<sup>54</sup> For Piacentini, modern architecture had to match the contemporary exigencies of society while also considering the '*ambiente*', i.e. the pre-existing built environment.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, although fascinated by foreign experimentation, he was convinced of the need to maintain continuity with the tradition of Italian architecture. As critic Roberto Papini argued, writing on the Quirinetta, 'Veii, Pompeii, and the Venetian villas can inspire the modern decorative arts.'<sup>56</sup> In the climate of the return to order, with nationalistic tensions enhanced by the recent war, past traditions were seen as the repository for a cultural identity that was otherwise difficult to define.

For Gio Ponti, modern decoration's relationship with the past was unavoidable. Ponti revived the classical tradition, using it consistently throughout his tenure as artistic director of the Richard-Ginori ceramics factory. Works of this period, made from his own designs, had names such as *Triumph*, *Classical conversation*, *Archaeological walk*, and *The home of the Ephebes*. The fascination with the antique stemmed from the refined neo-classicism that Ponti and Tomaso Buzzi wanted to revive as a suitable model for modern design. They were inspired by the example of French post-war designers, who used the epochs of the First Empire and July Monarchy as a way of returning to classical order.<sup>57</sup> Contemporary decorative practices followed suit: Guido Andlovitz (1900–1971),

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<sup>53</sup> AGR, press clippings, Renato Pacini, 'La Quirinetta. II. Della Pittura', *La Stirpe*, 3 (1927).

<sup>54</sup> Mario Lupano, *Marcello Piacentini*, (Bari: Laterza, 1991), p. 33. Alessandra Muntoni, 'Marcello Piacentini e l'Europa. Retroguardia e Rinnovamento', in Giorgio Ciucci, Simonetta Lux, and Franco Purini (eds.), *Marcello Piacentini architetto 1881–1960*, (Rome: Gangemi, 2012), pp. 53–72.

<sup>55</sup> Lupano (1991), p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> GNAM, Fondo Ugo Ojetto, cass. 55.20 (II), Letter from Papini to Ugo Ojetto, 14/02/1927.

<sup>57</sup> Alberto Clementi, *Storia dell'Arredamento (1850–1950)*, (Milan: Libreria, 1952), p. 164.

Guido Balsamo Stella (1882–1941), Pietro Melandri (1885–1976), Edoardo Del Neri and the Cito Filomarino brothers drew from traditional repertoires, occasionally blending them with references to the technological novelties of the modern world (figs. 3.56–3.58). Such references were also designed to add a familiar appeal to the schemes on walls, as well as to the products on the market.<sup>58</sup>

Rosso's early career must be considered in relation to these decorative artists, whose approach resulted in similar stylistic choices. They too 'pursued a keen desire for simplicity and nakedness, a light tone, often humorous, alternating scenes of genre, sometimes in costume, and little landscapes'.<sup>59</sup> Vases, glasses, ceramics, and fabrics became populated with small figures, whose quickly sketched anatomies were reminiscent of the elongated figures of Italian Mannerism, as well as the linearism of Modigliani's portraits and Oriental prints and masks. Rosso followed a similar path, blending those influences with others from antique and contemporary fine arts: in particular, his figures recall those to be found on Florentine fifteenth century *cassoni*, as well as the sculptures of Arturo Martini (1889–1947) (figs. 3.59, 3.60).<sup>60</sup> He used on the walls of buildings in Rome and central Italy stylistic solutions that were like those introduced in northern Italy in the design of the applied arts. Early critics framed these experiences within what would later be defined as Italian Art Deco. Initially, they called it 'modern' or, sometimes, 'Novecento', adjectives that often appear in reviews of Rosso's decorative schemes.<sup>61</sup> By adopting the angular and simplified forms of German and French artists, Rosso tried to appeal to the same bourgeoisie that elsewhere in Europe favoured the mixture of tradition and avant-garde that characterised Art Deco. Aware of the provincialism of the Italian context, Rosso softened the excesses of this style. His version of Art Deco is one of compromise: modernity is evoked through modern clothes, often blended into genre scenes that seem to represent a reality without time, where the lute and the thermos flask can coexist in harmony.

However, Rosso's work has one characteristic that separates him from other decorators working in the same style: a characteristic that Rosso shares with Gio Ponti, justifying

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<sup>58</sup> Pier Carlo Santini, 'Gio Ponti: un iniziatore', in *Gio Ponti: Ceramiche 1923–1930*, (Milan: Electa, 1983), p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> Susanna Weber, *Achille Funi e la pittura murale fra le due guerre*, (Firenze: SPES, 1987), p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Giuseppe Appella and Mario Quesada (eds.), *Arturo Martini. Da Valori Plastici agli anni estremi*, (Rome: De Luca, 1989).

<sup>61</sup> Fabio Benzi (ed.), *Il Déco in Italia*, (Milan: Electa, 2004), p. 98.



the latter's high regard for him. In addition to selecting a scene from Rosso's Good Old Days series in the Quirinetta for the cover of the first issue of his magazine *Domus* (fig. 3.61), in March 1928, Ponti published other details from the same scheme to illustrate his own recipe for contemporary decorative arts. Ponti recognised in Rosso's work a compelling embodiment of his own ideas: decoration had to look 'with modern sensitivity' at the styles of the past, because 'the style of modernity is anti-decorative'. Rosso, a 'born illustrator, a mischievous storyteller, a gentle and loving teaser', in the Hall of the Good Old Days 'amusingly' depicted the way in which illustrators of the 1830s saw their own era.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Rosso's eclectic and historicist approach was deemed legitimate by Ponti, as long as the styles of the past were filtered through a modern sensibility, i.e. re-interpreted with humour.

Scholars have been content to point out Ponti's humour without any further analysis: 'that humour, a bit malicious, which often shines through the decorative solutions'; 'that ironic and impertinent edge'; 'that light-hearted ease in treating the seriousness of the myth of the Mediterranean'.<sup>63</sup> I am convinced that Ponti and Rosso's humour was not merely an expression of a disposition or attitude towards life. Rather, humour was the creative device that allowed them to establish a distance from the past while appropriating it: they wanted to be modern, and yet they needed tradition. The only way to connect with the past, without betraying their aspirations to novelty, was to subvert slightly the rules of continuity: in other words, to play with tradition. Ponti was aware of the anti-decorative position developed by modern architects. If a new decorative style was impossible, the only viable path for decoration was to reinvent past styles.

Ponti channelled the post-war desire for order and rationality expressed by the Return to Order's revival of neo-classical solutions, which, nonetheless, underwent a process of stylisation. The renewed interest in Italian Mannerists might have stemmed from this conscious process of re-working an older example: in the sixteenth century, artists did much the same thing with the classical tradition rediscovered during the Renaissance. Yet, Ponti was also conscious that his was just a proposal, destined soon or later to be

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<sup>62</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Pitture Murali di Giulio Rosso', *Domus*, 3 (1928), 24–25

<sup>63</sup> Santini (1983), p. 19; Paolo Portoghesi, 'Le ceramiche di Gio Ponti' and Anty Pansera, 'Pontesca', in Paolo Portoghesi and Anty Pansera, *Gio Ponti alla Manifattura di Doccia*, (Milan: Sugarco, 1982), pp. 13, 27.

surpassed. Humour expresses Ponti and Rosso's awareness of the limits of their creative act, a resolution not to take their practices too seriously. Maybe, it also reveals a fundamental scepticism about their own reality.

Rather than developing a psychological portrait of Rosso, which I am not prepared to sketch, I want to analyse the characteristic of his amusing style. Rosso's humorous register is defined by critics in different terms: humour, caricature, satire, farce, irony. Although these terms can be interpreted as synonymous, they are technically distinct means of communication. The ambiguous and conflicting ways in which Rosso's work is interpreted reveal a multifarious approach. Humour is an element of discourse, and its acknowledged central feature is the incongruity expressed/detected in a situation and/or character.<sup>64</sup> Incongruity is a common element in Rosso's decorative schemes. It operates not only at the narrative, but also at the stylistic and 'intervisual' levels, assuming different connotations.<sup>65</sup> In the San Paolo station, incongruity is a feature of Rosso's reinterpretation of the mythological repertoire. For example, the image of Neptune tripping over the dolphin is comic because normality is disturbed by an unexpected event; it is a device typical of pantomimes and slapstick silent films (with which Rosso was familiar).<sup>66</sup> The effect is enhanced by the irreverence shown towards a supposedly almighty god. In presenting this version of the marine *Thiasos*, Rosso engages with parody, i.e. 'the comic reworking of older or "preformed" examples'.<sup>67</sup>

As Rose points out, parody is also used as a way of modernizing the parodied work.<sup>68</sup> Rosso follows this strategy in the *tabarin* of the Savoia Theatre (the nineteenth century lady smoking a cigarette; Lucullo being served by a modern waiter) and in the Quirinetta theatre (the Pompeian and Renaissance fictive architectures framing modern still lifes). His design for the Hall of the Good Old Days is parodic and therefore modernizing. Here the decorator inserts narrative details – the boy urinating against the ancient ruin (fig.

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<sup>64</sup> Raj Kishor Singh, 'Humour, Irony and Satire in Literature', *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4 (2012), 65–72.

<sup>65</sup> Intervisuality, or interpictureity, has been understood as the visual counterpart to intertextuality. I am using the definition formulated by Margaret A. Rose: 'the relationship between the "intrapictorial" pictures found within a work as well as [...] their relationship to older external pictures or images'. Rose (2011), p. 3 (footnote 4).

<sup>66</sup> Before the war, Rosso paid for his studies by playing the piano during the screening of silent films. Edoardo Rosso, personal interview, 03/02/2014.

<sup>67</sup> Rose (2011), p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

3.62); the dog barking at a girl by a river, who raises her naked legs in fright – that undermine the sense of Romantic nostalgia, which at first sight pervades the scheme. Rosso does not include only traditional elements in his parodic pantomime: in the theatre, the still lifes seem to mock the sense of mystery of contemporary *Pittura Metafisica*, downplaying the potentially revealing associations created by the assemblage of strange objects by turning them into mere decorative compositions.

Rosso's humour works beyond the narrative level; context plays a strategic role in creating possible connotations. Indeed, his parodic fantasies, enacted on the walls and ceiling of Piacentini's architecture instead of through the usual media of pictorial parodies, produce an ironic effect. Irony is detected when the literal meaning of a statement is the opposite of its intended one. In order for irony to work, the context must highlight the incongruity of the statement, and the audience must be receptive to the humourist's message. Within the context of Italian mural decoration of the period (as described in Chapter 2) the iconographic variations and the subversion of the canonical rules of the genre (concerning historical narratives with monumental goals) have a clear, ironic effect. For example, in Piacentini's house in Genzano, a former Capuchin friary, Rosso illustrated a sonnet by the poet Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (1791–1863), allegedly found on a wall and describing the lazy life of local friars (1924–1925).<sup>69</sup> An ironic effect is generated by the tension between what an audience expects mural decoration in a friary to consist of and the representation of friars as light-hearted fellows devoted to summer pleasures completely forgetting their spiritual duties (figs. 3.63, 3.64).<sup>70</sup>

In the Quirinetta Hall of Cheerfulness, Rosso seems to carry out an ironic analysis of his own audience. In the picnic scene, urban diners can see a reflection of themselves in which traditional roles are subverted. Emancipated women look confidently at their visual interlocutors, while men grapple with the throes of sentimental pain. This take on contemporaneity was new to the genre of Italian mural decoration, which had previously allowed contemporary events to be represented only as celebrations of characters, events, and facts considered important to the history of the community.

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<sup>69</sup> Zucca (1925), p. 3. Rosso painted also another mural representing a scene of grape harvest.

<sup>70</sup> Anti-Catholic invectives like Belli's were common until the Lateran Pacts were signed in 1929, ending the political impasse between the Vatican and the Kingdom of Italy that existed since 1871.

Although these figurations have the scale and the position of traditional monumental frescos, Rosso's approach is different: rather than pointing out examples of virtue, he engages with observers, showing their less noble appetites and needs, their shifting objects of admiration, and the comic potential to be found in established social conventions.

Does Rosso's use of irony and parody hide a critique of his ironised/parodied objects (whether past traditions, contemporary tendencies, conventions of the genre, or his audience)? I do not think so. As Margaret A. Rose pointed out, the use of irony and parody implies the inclusion of the ironised/parodied object in the process. It is the continuity that is highlighted, not the fracture. 'The parodied work can be both a target of modernisation and a model for the parodist', in this being distinguished from satire.<sup>71</sup> Rosso certainly positioned himself within a discourse of continuity with the past: the latter represented the tradition, both exhausted and indispensable, whose status as a repository of endless themes, styles, and figures was exposed irreverently to entertain and amuse the observer. However, such a use of parody and irony must be linked to the typology of the architecture that Rosso contributed to shape: the *tabarin* and restaurant were leisure spaces, designed to imitate the fashionable glamour of similar venues in European metropolis such as Paris and Vienna. Such temples of leisure were still uncommon in provincial Florence and Rome, and decorative norms had yet to be established. Rosso, by means of his humorous approach, adapted the serious tradition of Italian mural decoration to the needs of the modern entertainment and fun space, achieving results that have remained unique in the Italian context.

## Conclusion

The schemes designed by Rosso for Piacentini from 1921–22 are the very first examples of mural decoration with a 'deliberately modern tone which is the decisive character of Art Deco'; murals produced by Arturo Songa (1893–1940) in Milan, Bruno Santi in Bologna and Edoardo Del Neri in Rome were all completed after 1927.<sup>72</sup> Their neglect in the literature on Italian Art Deco can be justified by the fact that, with the exception of the early sgraffiti in the San Paolo station, they are all lost. However, after 1927, changes in society seems to have turned work that early critics greeted with enthusiasm into

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<sup>71</sup> Rose (2011), p. 79.

<sup>72</sup> Benzi (2004), p. 54.

something disreputable. Giovannetti's article, for example, reflects that the 'liveliness, insolence, and quips' emanating from Rosso's 'angular folksy figures' could be 'disconcerting': they seemed in contrast with 'the heroic sobriety of our times', when 'joy is off-season'.<sup>73</sup> Giovannetti detected a potential clash between Rosso's approach to decoration and a cultural context that was witnessing not only a (further) surge in nationalism, but also an emphasis on the values of heroic sobriety and sacrifice promoted by fascist propaganda. Mino Maccari, the Mussolini-enthusiast director of *Il Selvaggio*, wrote with regret in 1926 that 'we have often noticed that Fascism does not have a manifestation of fun'.<sup>74</sup> Grimness, rather than happiness, was becoming the cypher of the dominant political narrative, and this put Rosso in an awkward position. Indeed, as Rose observed:

'Because both irony and parody confuse the normal process of communication by offering more than one message to be decoded by the receiver of the work, such confusion may also serve to conceal the author's – or artist's – intended meaning from immediate interpretation and make it useful for esoteric political comment in times of censorship'.<sup>75</sup>

Rosso's art, which had enjoyed success and popularity began, by the end of the 1920s, to look suspicious. Carlo Tridenti, reviewing the Quirinetta, considered Rosso's humour a form of popular farce, gentle and, innocuous; yet, the critic also understood that the humorous game that the decorator was playing with tradition implied a slight challenge to its authority.<sup>76</sup> Was Rosso playing with or exposing the incongruities of the glorious tradition of mural decoration, the idiosyncrasies of his audience and the contradictions of the Return to Order? In fact, Tridenti, foreseeing the problems of a public art that, being commissioned by the authoritarian regime, could not carry any kind of ambiguity, encouraged Rosso to close this juvenile parenthesis and dedicate himself to serious academic studies. As will be demonstrated in the second part of this thesis, Rosso, for the rest of his Italian career, followed this advice only in part.

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<sup>73</sup> Giovannetti (1927), p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in: Luciano Troisio (ed.), *Le Riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà*, (Treviso: Canova, 1975), p. 67.

<sup>75</sup> Rose (2011), p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> Tridenti (1927), p. 11.

#### 4. The decoration of the object: Rosso's applied arts

*'This young decorator has injected a lyric touch of mischief, an accent of peasant, refined cheerfulness where there was just bloodless repetition. He has created fairy-tales, dances, dialogues between people and things, wooden and marine myths, funny, exquisite, gallant weavings of wings, leaves, humans, objects, fishes, fruit; he has given birth to an incredible candid world, embroidered with an exhilarant, melancholic, backwards and hyper-contemporary spirit: a portent.'*<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I focus on Rosso's response to some of the pivotal aspects of the interwar debate on the modernisation of Italian applied arts. As a decorator, Rosso was asked to provide designs for both architecture and objects: together, they had to cooperate harmoniously in the definition of the modern space. Indeed, throughout the 1920s, Rosso maintained a unitary attitude across the different fields of his decorative practice, characterised by an eclectic reference to modern and antique styles and humorous reinterpretation of traditional motifs. However, there was a difference between these two fields, which necessitated a different approach on Rosso's part, and justifies a separate chapter on the applied arts. Whereas architectural decoration allowed Rosso to rely on both his imaginative and technical skills, the applied arts participated in defining space through the mediation of the object, whose technical competence was the prerogative of the artisan. Thus, the process of negotiation from which decoration stemmed, usually involving the decorator/artist, the architect, and the patron, was complicated by the presence of an additional professional, whose shifting status, role, and agenda deserve attention. In this chapter, I will develop questions that are specific to this field, exploring the relationship between artists and artisans. I will ask how Rosso's work relates to that debate, and consider the role of the applied arts in the definition of the modern space and their status within the cultural policies implemented by the fascist regime.

In order to examine Rosso's response to these questions, I will analyse the most significant episodes (collaborations, exhibitions, and references) between 1927 and

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<sup>1</sup> Corrado Pavolini, 'La III Mostra di Arte Decorativa', *Il Tevere*, 07/06/1927, p. 3.

1940, far beyond the period considered in the first part of this thesis. Indeed, as the next sections will make clear, Rosso's applied arts design encapsulate the themes and approaches discussed in the previous chapters, while anticipating some that will be discussed in the following ones. This will not be a chronological reconstruction of Rosso's production, or a discourse on groups of objects categorised by technique. Instead, Rosso's work will be considered in relation to the problems highlighted above. From a methodological point of view, this chapter is a challenge: its main subjects are moveable objects (as opposed to fixed images decorating architecture), so the Material Culture-informed approach that characterises my thesis becomes more resonant than ever. Unfortunately, however, I have never had the chance to experience directly a piece of applied art designed by Rosso; either they are lost or their location is currently unknown. The following discourse is therefore entirely constructed on an indirect, immaterial appreciation of those forgotten items. For this reason, wherever possible, I have referred to existing accounts of the phenomenological approach of Rosso's contemporaries. The words of Corrado Pavolini (1898–1980), quoted above, demonstrate how rich, exhilarating, and evocative Rosso's applied arts design could be, and how highly regarded, despite post-war oblivion.

#### **4.1 The artist and the craft: Rosso and Jesurum**

One of the recurrent themes in the debate about the renewal of Italian applied arts that followed the end of World War I was the question of whether artists and architects should be involved in craft design. It stemmed from a conviction that the decadence of the decorative arts was caused by the separation between the fine and 'minor' arts, which condemned the latter to be nothing more than a dull imitation of the former.<sup>2</sup> For Roberto Papini, Guido Marangoni, Gio Ponti, and the organisers of the first exhibition of decorative arts held in Monza in 1923, the solution was straightforward: to reverse the trend and promote collaboration between modern artists and traditional

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<sup>2</sup> Medieval theorists did not distinguish between fine and minor arts: within the classification of knowledge, all were grouped under the definition of mechanical arts. This view was challenged during the Renaissance, when painting, sculpture, and architecture were elevated to the level of the liberal arts (poetry, music, philosophy, and the sciences), while the applied arts were considered inferior. This hierarchical distinction was confirmed by later theorists; according to Isabelle Frank, we are still 'busily engaged in demolishing' it now. Isabelle Frank (ed.), *The Theory of Decorative Arts*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 3–5. See also Ferdinando Bologna, *Dalle arti minori all'industrial design. Storia di una ideologia*, (Bari: Laterza, 1972).

manufacturers.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the interwar period, there were numerous collaborations, with interesting results and a lively exchange of opinions and experiences. Some critics warned against the experiment. According to Vincenzo Costantini, artists ‘mainly coming from easel painting’ indulged their fantasies, rather than studying the characteristics of materials and techniques, or focusing on the objects.<sup>4</sup> Academic training did not transmit the necessary skills to engage with the design of objects. Instead, decorators and architects were viewed as ideally placed to provide the applied arts with modern forms: their training aimed to create a unitary and harmonic ensemble, to which architecture, fixed decoration, and movable objects had to contribute.

Collaboration between artists/architects and artisan became the prevalent model, and the Biennials of Monza represented its showcase. At the third exhibition in 1927, Rosso placed himself at the forefront of those willing to participate in such partnerships. He provided designs for a carpet for the Guido Pugi Company of Prato (which was awarded the first prize at a competition organised by the ENAPI), as well as for a stained-glass panel made by Pietro Chiesa for the *Domus Nova* rooms (analysed in the next section).<sup>5</sup> Crucially, thanks to the critic Roberto Papini, he began a collaboration with the Jesurum lacework company that, throughout the interwar period, was constantly referred to as a model: ‘the binomial Rosso/Jesurum is constantly cited by ourselves among the most significant examples whenever we want to show what a hearty collaboration between an artist of modern taste and an intelligent entrepreneur is capable of’ wrote Felice in 1929.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as I am about to show, Rosso’s engagement with Jesurum partly confirms and partly disproves Costantini’s critiques. His practice was based on a meticulous study of the technique, and it resulted in the renewal of antiquated repertoires; at the same time, the hierarchical distinction between designer and artisan was reaffirmed, and the potential of the latter frustrated by its dependency on the former.

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<sup>3</sup> Gio Ponti, ‘I vetri incisi di Balsamo Stella’, *Domus*, 5 (1929), 19. This proposal, of course, was by no means original: it stemmed from the theories of William Morris (1834–1896), who supported the ‘reunion of artists and craftsmen’. Frank (2000), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Vincenzo Costantini, ‘L’Arte applicata all’Industria’, *Arte Pura e Decorativa*, 1 (1922), 14. Samuel Bing, writing in *Dekorative Kunst* in 1897, also criticised this practice. Frank (2000), pp. 71–73.

<sup>5</sup> Guido Marangoni, *La III mostra internazionale di arti decorative nella villa reale di Monza*, (Bergamo: Istituto di Arti Grafiche, 1927), p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 220: letter from Carlo A. Felice to Papini, 24/09/1929.



In 1926, Roberto Papini was contacted by Elsa Jesurum-Bolchini, one of the heirs of the prestigious Venetian lacework company (founded in 1873).<sup>7</sup> The company was suffering from competition with modern laceworks designed in central Europe.<sup>8</sup> Papini suggested involving an artist to provide new decorative motifs. Giulio Rosso was hired to update the production in view of the 1927 third Biennial of the decorative arts in Monza, where Jesurum was assigned a room on its own.<sup>9</sup> Between November 1926 and March 1927, Rosso sent cartoons for three curtains, two tablecloths, one table runner and four doilies (two rectangular, one circular, and one in the shape of a twelve-pointed star).<sup>10</sup> Their success was resounding. Guido Marangoni wrote that the ‘renaissance of the art of lace [...] has given its first signals in the Jesurum room, with the exquisitely daring and personal essays by Giulio Rosso.’<sup>11</sup> Papini also wrote about the ‘renaissance of Venetian lacework’, praising Rosso’s ‘harmony and spirit of conception, and beauty and skilful interpretation.’<sup>12</sup> According to the critic Alberto Neppi, the Jesurum room was ‘the only authentic revelation’ of the exhibition.<sup>13</sup> Rosso’s laceworks were reviewed in international magazines, such as *The Architectural Review*, *The Studio*, and *The Sphere*.<sup>14</sup> Yoï Maraini, writing in *The Christian Science Monitor*, observed that Rosso’s designs for Jesurum ‘have in them a modern flippancy’, and that no one could ever say that ‘lace design lacks the imprint of the note of the day.’<sup>15</sup> Her husband, sculptor Antonio Maraini, praised Jesurum for adopting the bold policy of the Richard-Ginori Ceramics Company in commissioning an artist with a ‘new sensibility’ to design modern artefacts.<sup>16</sup> These

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<sup>7</sup> On the history of the Jesurum Company, see Guido Marangoni, *Enciclopedia delle moderne arti decorative italiane – vol. V: Le stoffe d'arte e l'arredamento della casa*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1928), p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Marie Dormoy considered the laceworks designed by Czech artist Emilie Paličková-Mildeová (1892–1973), exhibited at the 1925 exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris (and in Monza in 1923) the most modern in Europe. They dominated her *Dentelles de l'Europe Centrale*, (Paris: Typographie G. Kadar, 1925), which showed the best examples displayed in Paris. Italian laceworks were not even mentioned.

<sup>9</sup> The correspondence between Elsa and Papini is shared between the AFAUF and the Biblioteca Berenson of Villa ai Tatti (BBT), in Settignano. For the Jesurum-Papini letters see AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 101, 116, and BBT, Fondo Papini, fasc. 13.112.

<sup>10</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 116, letter from Elsa Jesurum to Papini, 22/11/1926 and letter from Mario Jesurum to Papini, 26/03/1927.

<sup>11</sup> Marangoni, *Enciclopedia*, vol. V, (1928), p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Papini, *Le arti d'oggi*, (Milan: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1930), figs. 675–678.

<sup>13</sup> Alberto Neppi, ‘La moderna arte decorativa alla terza biennale di Monza’, *La Stirpe*, 7 (1927), 426.

<sup>14</sup> AGR, press clippings, ‘From the Adriatic Queen’, *The Sphere*, 24/04/1928; Roberto Papini, ‘Monza’, *The Studio*, 419 (1928), 135, 137; Yoï Maraini, ‘The Modern Italians’, *The Architectural Review*, 2 (1930), 101–104.

<sup>15</sup> AGR, press clippings, Yoï Maraini, ‘The modern note in lace’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10/04/1929.

<sup>16</sup> AGR, press clippings, Antonio Maraini, ‘La III Biennale di Monza. Merletti, Vetri, Ceramiche’, *Corriere della Sera*, 01/06/1927.

endorsements were pivotal in establishing Rosso's reputation among the new wave of modern applied arts designers. What were the characteristics of this collaboration between the decorator and the manufacturer? What were the pros and cons of this model, constantly heralded as an example of good practice in the literature of the period?

First, it is useful to address Costantini's concern about the two different worlds of designers and artisans, separated by a technical gap. Writing about his experience as a designer of modern laceworks, Giulio Rosso recalled how 'breaking into that world of subtle textures of threads, needles and bobbins, to understand their resources and be able to master them with modern spirit of new designs, was not an easy task, unaware, as I was, of the secrets of the technique.'<sup>17</sup> Roberto Papini, who proposed the collaboration, wrote in *Emporium* that it was admirable of Rosso 'to have studied with patience the traditional stitches and interpreted one by one their character to adapt his designs to them.'<sup>18</sup> It is very likely that Rosso went to Venice in order to receive instruction in the art of lacework. There, he learned the characteristics of the two main typologies of lace – needle and bobbin – and the various stitches, which he describes with competence in the article published in *Cellini* in 1942. The results of this training are evident in some rare original sketches and drawings kept in the collection of the Levi-Morenos family, owners of the Jesurum Company from 1939 to 2005.<sup>19</sup>

Although small in number, these drawings are useful for understanding Rosso's approach. Indeed, one group, made for 'curtains for a big window with three panes' (1934), can be compared with samples for the final work (fig. 4.1).<sup>20</sup> First, Rosso prepared small sketches, with different compositions (fig. 4.2). Later, maybe after Jesurum had approved the sketches, he created a proper, in-scale design (fig. 4.3). On it, he wrote letters and numbers – 'Ro', 'gh', '2' – and marked the contours and areas in different pastel colours: red and blue. 'Gh' is an abbreviation for 'ghipur' (misspelling of the French word *guipure* – 'gimp' in English), the Venetian term for a type of heavy

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<sup>17</sup> Giulio Rosso, 'Storia Recente del Merletto Veneziano', *Cellini*, 6 (1942), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Roberto Papini, 'Le arti a Monza nel 1927 – Gli Italiani', *Emporium*, 391 (1927), 30.

<sup>19</sup> The Levi-Morenos collection is hosted in Cà Maffio, Treviso. I visited it in spring 2013.

<sup>20</sup> 'Ricami per la casa', *Domus*, 12 (1934), 31. These are filed as having been designed for the 'Caffè Motta in piazza Duomo' in the Levi Morenos Collection. However, these curtains are not visible in photographs of that space.

lacework.<sup>21</sup> 'Ro' is associated with *punto rosa* (rose point). The different colours may have instructed the embroiderers how to treat contours and surfaces, using the *punto piatto* (flat stitch) or the *punto grosso di Venezia* (gross point), to modulate the relief of the embroidery. Thus, Rosso did not merely sketch compositions: he designed laceworks with an understanding of the effects that he wanted to achieve, even giving instructions on which points should be used in the details.

This technical knowledge was fundamental to developing a design that exploited the full potentials of the materials and craft, as well as the traditional repertoire that Rosso had been asked to update. Raffaello Giolli (1889–1945), one of the shrewdest intellectuals of the period, appreciated Rosso's 'agile and delicate' laceworks, because they were 'not only a question of "stitch", but also of line and tone.'<sup>22</sup> Giolli's reference to line and tone help frame the question of how Rosso managed to modernise the repertoire. He used the same strategy as in his architectural decoration, incorporating a humorous reinterpretation of traditional repertoires ('tone' and 'delicacy'), references to modernity ('agility'), and stylised representation ('line'), following the example of contemporary decorative artists in Italy and abroad.<sup>23</sup> These elements are evident in the first set of laceworks designed for Jesurum in 1927, and are typical of his production until the mid-1930s, when his style became less dependent on traditional repertoires (and consequently less humorous) and more abstract.

The majority of pieces designed for Jesurum in 1927 featured decorative motifs derived from the traditional repertoire established by *modellari* (books of models) published in Venice during the sixteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Scrolls and grotesques dominated the structure of Rosso's designs, animated by the insertion of figures, animals, and birds. This can be seen in a table runner (fig. 4.4) and in two of the three curtains, including one in embroidered mousseline with the motif of a small chariot and flowers (fig. 4.5). Elements of novelty emerge in the third curtain, which was characterised by vertical

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<sup>21</sup> Whenever possible, I have included an English translation of the Italian names of stitches. They are taken from the glossary of Santina M. Levy's book, *Lace. A History*, (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1984), pp. 109–120. Levy acknowledges that there is no 'universally agreed vocabulary' of lacework (p. 2). When a no suitable translation can be found, I have kept the Italian name as reported in the sources.

<sup>22</sup> Raffaello Giolli, 'Pizzi di Giulio Rosso', 1928. *Problemi di Arte Attuale*, 1 (1928), 8.

<sup>23</sup> In a letter to Papini, Rosso reported that he had seen 'wonderful stuff' in the German section of the 1927 Biennale of Monza, and that Ponti and Buzzi had done 'delightful things'. AFAUF, Fondo Papini, letter from Rosso to Papini, fasc. 116.

<sup>24</sup> Doretta Davanzo Poli, *Il Merletto Veneziano*, (Novara: De Agostini, 1998), p. 39.

stripes ending in trapezoidal sections containing fishes and birds, which break the continuity of the upper edge by creating a 'saw-tooth' profile (fig. 4.6). Having an unconventional corner on the bottom of each section fragmented the lower edge, giving the curtain a strikingly modernist aspect. Rosso's decorative imagination was unleashed in the circular and star shaped doilies, in *punto di Venezia* (Venetian point or *point de Venise*) and *punto tagliato* (cutwork) respectively. Both present extremely rich decorations of stylised vegetal and abstract motifs framing four pairs of figures that reference the city of Venice. Both make virtuoso use of a wide range of different stitches to animate the compositions and render the different textures of the luxurious clothes of characters engaging in festive circular processions: lively Venetians in eighteenth century costumes on the circular doily (figs. 4.7, 4.8), and fantastic figures engaging in a masquerade on the star-shaped one (figs. 4.9, 4.10). Here the male and female pairs face each other while dancing: the variety of stitches and the shapes of their fantastic clothes almost turn them into abstract motifs, which nevertheless possess an impressive internal energy.

A modern move towards the renewal of iconographies is clearly detectable. For instance, it was unprecedented to represent modern sports or contemporary naval, aerial, and terrestrial modes of mechanical transport in the lacework craft.<sup>25</sup> Rosso took inspiration from the creations of Balsamo Stella, who, since 1925, had been designing glass vases for the SALIR (Studio Ars Labor Industrie Riunite) that featured monuments of Venice, ocean liners, and airplanes (figs. 4.11, 4.12).<sup>26</sup> The central section of an oval tablecloth in *modano* (filet) featured a fantasy on the theme of navigation: alongside the usual rowing boat, sailing ship, and galleon was a paddle steamer with smoke coming out of its funnels (figs. 4.13, 4.14). Two square filet doilies presented the most unusual motifs: one featured two boxers fighting a match in a boxing ring lit by electric lamps (fig. 4.15), and the other an engine driver next to a steam locomotive in front of a railway station (fig. 4.16). In the latter, the position of the man suggests that he has a relationship with the machine. If this impression is correct, the filet may well be a *hommage* to Buster Keaton's film *The General* (USA, 1926), distributed in Italy with the

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<sup>25</sup> Guido Marussig, 'Il padiglione delle arti decorative alla biennale di Venezia', *Rassegna di Architettura*, 3 (1933), 133.

<sup>26</sup> Elsa Jesurum admired Balsamo Stella's glassware. *Breve Storia del Merletto Veneziano*, (Milan: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1927), p. 14.

title *Come vinsi la guerra* in March 1927, when Rosso was working on this lacework design.<sup>27</sup> The reference to Keaton's filmography is strengthened by the fact that, prior to *The General*, the last film by the American director to have been distributed in Italy was *Battling Butler* (USA, 1926 – Italian title: *Se perdo la pazienza*). In this film, Keaton plays Alfred Butler, the scion of a wealthy family who reinvents himself as a boxer to win the woman he loves, a story that could have inspired the unusual theme of the companion filet-work.<sup>28</sup> References to modernity continued to appear in laceworks designed by Rosso after the Biennial of 1927. In *The Sports* (1928), Rosso represented six male and female characters skiing, sailing (a gondolier), boxing, fencing, and playing tennis, football, polo, as well as doing gymnastics (fig. 4.17).<sup>29</sup> Airplanes and balloons float above the monuments of Venice (St Mark's Basilica, the Guglie bridge, gondolas, and mooring poles) in a Jesurum tablecloth designed in 1930 (fig. 4.18).

*Domus*, in publishing Rosso's laceworks, praised 'the classic grace with which [he] inserts modern themes and dynamism in the traditional manner of this art', at the same time highlighting his 'precious and humorous inventions'.<sup>30</sup> As he had previously done in witty mural decorations, Rosso generated a conflict between their status and the images they contained: this is evident in the Jesurum filets, which had themes drawn from comic Buster Keaton films, even though they were meant to adorn elegant armchairs in the living room of a high-bourgeoisie household. Rosso repeated this approach in a stained-glass panel designed in 1928 and made by Alberto Quentin for the Venice Biennale (fig. 4.19). It formed a pair with another, commissioned from Florentine artist Gianni Vagnetti (1897–1956).<sup>31</sup> According to Lucia Mannini, the themes of the two works celebrated the 'love for the poetic world of the countryside, typical of the Tuscan Novecento group, of which Vagnetti was part'.<sup>32</sup> However, the original titles of the panels (which can be deduced from the Biennale photographic archive) emphasise the

<sup>27</sup> Francesco Ballo, *Il Cinema di Buster Keaton*, (Alessandria: Falsopiano, 2013), p. 650; AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 116, letter from Elsa Jesurum to Papini, 26/03/1927.

<sup>28</sup> However, the possible reference to the films of Buster Keaton was not detected by contemporary reviewers. In *Ricami d'Italia*, the two filets were called '*La lotta*' ('the fight') and '*La siesta*' ('the nap'). *Ricami d'Italia* (Turin: Lattes, 1931), pp. 20, 21.

<sup>29</sup> This lacework was probably commissioned by Mario Jesurum to replace a piece sold to an American buyer at the Monza 1927 Biennale. AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 116, letter from Mario Jesurum to Papini, 10 giugno 1927.

<sup>30</sup> 'Un nuovo merletto disegnato da Giulio Rosso', *Domus*, 10 (1928), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Quentin had designed and implemented the glass dome of Piacentini's Savoia Theatre in Florence. Roberto Papini, 'Vecchio e nuovo in un teatro fiorentino', *Il Mondo*, 15/12/1922, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Lucia Mannini, 'Vetrare da esposizione', *Artista*, (2006), 121.

ironic, rather than poetic approach adopted by the two artists: *Il giardino dei poeti* ('The poets' garden', by Vagnetti) and *Villici all'osteria* ('Peasants at a tavern', by Rosso). Vagnetti's supposed poets are young men declaiming verses and reciting poems while flirting with their partners; Rosso's *villici* (a synonym for peasants, used for its humorous connotations) play cards in a rural tavern, while another fellow drinks wine in the cellar below. Flirting, drinking and having fun were rarely themes of the Novecento *Toscano*, which usually focused on more meditative representations of the local landscape, with its gentle nature, small towns, humble living, and unshakable traditions.<sup>33</sup> Vagnetti and Rosso's works represent rather naïve sketches of the pleasures of country life. In addition, Rosso plays with the composition to enhance elements of ambiguity. The central image is framed by perspective boxes containing still-lives with objects (vases, glasses, and a flower basket) and tools (a sprinkler, rake and hoe) that relate more to gardening than farming. The setting of the central scene (under a coffered barrel vault) is also ironic: this device was often used in early Renaissance bas-relief decorations on the doors of tabernacles. The Italian word *tabernacolo*, comes from the Latin *tabernaculum*, which shares its origin with the word *taberna*, meaning little house (from which *taverna* – tavern – is derived). The detail of the cellar with a wine drinker strengthens the ironic intent achieved by referring to early Renaissance religious decorations on containers of wafers.

The examination of Rosso's approach to designing crafts and the solutions he provided to modernise such designs leads on to another question: was this strategy successful? In one sense, it certainly was: the Jesurum laceworks designed by Rosso were positively reviewed and received, and imitated by other artists (as shown in the Conclusion of this chapter); they were sent to exhibitions abroad as examples of renewed Italian design, and constantly cited as positive example of the partnership between artist and artisan.<sup>34</sup> Rosso, by virtue of his training as a decorator, was able to immerse himself in technical

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<sup>33</sup> Corrado Marsan (ed.), *Il Novecento Toscano. Opere dal 1923 al 1933*, (Fiesole: AAST, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> Laceworks designed by Rosso were exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1928 [*Sedicesima Esposizione internazionale d'arte della città di Venezia*, (Venice: Officine Grafiche Ferrari, 1928), pp. 61, 85], in Nice in 1929, at the *Exposition du Novecento Italiano* organised by Maraini and Paolo Venini [*Exposition du Novecento Italiano – peinture, sculpture, décoration*, (Nice: L'éclaireteur, 1929), p. 58], and in Barcelona, at the World Exhibition held in the same year. Here, the laceworks were shown in glass cases in the main hall of the Italian Pavilion, designed by architect Piero Portaluppi (1888–1967). With Guido Ravasi's fabrics, Carlo Turina's tea service, Francesco Randone's ceramics, and Alfredo Ravasco's jewels, they represented an anthology of the best of Italian artistic manufacturing. *La Participación de Italia a la Exposición de Barcelona 1929*, (Rome: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1929), p. 81.

expertise (something he did again when asked to design mosaics), whereas other artists merely provided drawings that had to be turned into cartoons suitable for the materials and crafts. However, other questions remained unresolved. Writing in 1933, Roberto Papini, although cherishing the renewal of Italian design through collaborations between artists, architects, and artisans, confessed that he did not know whether the outcome was a commercial success.<sup>35</sup> This admission is of great relevance. It shows how the efforts made by intellectuals, critics, artists, and architects to renew the applied arts often focused on questions of style and repertoires, rather than on the conditions and commercial requirements of the crafts. Papini's doubts might have arisen from his own experience with Jesurum. Indeed, the company remained in dire straits: the expected widening of the market was very limited, and Rosso's work had a cost (500 lire, for the designs of the 1930 Triennial) that had to be accounted for in both the company accounts and the prices of the pieces.<sup>36</sup>

Undoubtedly, the episodic nature of the relationship between artists and artisans did not encourage a consistent development strategy, and there were tensions between the two. Elsa Jesurum wrote to Papini that 'there are two Rossos, the one who works under your precious guidance, and... the other', hinting at a disappointing inconsistency in the quality of Rosso's designs, as well as his difficulty to respecting deadlines.<sup>37</sup> Rosso, as an independent decorator, pursued different commissions at the same time, assigning them different level of priority. When the cartoons for the laceworks to be shown at the Fourth Triennial in Monza arrived in March 1930, Mrs Jesurum was not amused; she wrote to Papini that the designs were 'paltry and hasty', and that the display would be mediocre.<sup>38</sup> At that time, Rosso was focused on preparing his room in the 'Gallery of Decorators' (discussed in Chapter 7), and must have paid less attention to Jesurum. Designers, not being bound by a lasting contract, were invited to collaborate every two or three years, to prepare for an exhibition of decorative arts; they were fundamentally disinterested in the commercial success of the enterprise. Although Rosso's collaboration with Jesurum lasted until 1937, he was never asked to become the artistic

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<sup>35</sup> Roberto Papini, 'La V Triennale di Milano. Ispezione alle Arti', *Emporium*, 468 (1933), 378, 380.

<sup>36</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 101, letter from Elsa Jesurum to Papini, 19/04/1930.

<sup>37</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 101, letter from Elsa Jesurum to Papini, 29/09/1928.

<sup>38</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 220, letter from Elsa Jesurum to Papini, 27/03/1930. However, after seeing the finished laceworks, she had to admit to Papini that the outcome exceeded her expectations (letter from Elsa Jesurum to Papini, 19/04/1930).

director of the company, as Gio Ponti was for Richard-Ginori, Guido Andlovitz for the Società Ceramica Italiana, or Guido Balsamo Stella for the SALIR. This episodic approach was the one generally adopted and promoted by exhibitions and official bodies: designers and manufacturers often collaborated, but these relationships only rarely turned into stable cooperative arrangements. This situation reinforced the hierarchical separation between the two spheres, with the artisan reduced to the status of a mere maker.

#### 4.2 Spaces and patrons of the modern applied arts

In the *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* (known as *Treccani*, after its publisher's surname), the entry for *Decorazione* was written in 1931 by the architect Vincenzo Fasolo (1885–1969), who defined it 'as the whole of ornaments of objects and architectural elements'; its role was to express 'the aesthetic and spiritual aspirations of the time and [degree of] civilisation'. Twenty-seven illustrations recounted a visual history of decoration from the Palace of Sennacherib (Assyria, sec VIII BC), to the vestibule of Casa Botti in Rome, with murals by Giulio Rosso (see Chapter 5).<sup>39</sup> Far from considering decoration an autonomous practice, Fasolo expressed the view that it depended on architecture, echoing what Alfredo Melani (1859–1928) in his monumental *L'Ornamento nell'Architettura* had already stated clearly: 'the architects lead the decorators'.<sup>40</sup> Yet, Melani himself noticed that architecture in Italy was late to adopt the modernist novelties emerging abroad. It was therefore necessary to deliberately create situations that would enable the applied arts to participate in defining the modern environment. The Monza Biennials tested the ability of decorators and artisans to modernise objects and spaces, while at the same time educating the taste of their potential clients. Giving the applied arts an educational scope was a concept championed by Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927) from the beginning of the century. He was convinced that what he called 'the applied arts movement' would represent 'the visible manifestation of the inner, spiritual impulses of the times'.<sup>41</sup> These

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<sup>39</sup> Vincenzo Fasolo, 'Decorazione', *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere e Arti*, 16 vols., (Milan: Bestetti, Tumminelli, Treves, 1932), XII, pp. 465–66, tabs. CXXIII–CXXVII. Fasolo was a friend and collaborator of Marcello Piacentini, with whom he co-founded the Roman School of Architecture (1925).

<sup>40</sup> Alfredo Melani, *L'Ornamento nell'Architettura*, 3 vols., (Milan: Vallardi, 1927), III, p. 342. As pointed out by Vittorio Gregotti his view was widely shared by Italian intellectuals of the time. Vittorio Gregotti, 'Il disegno dei manufatti (1900–1945)', in Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant (eds.), *Arte Italiana. Presenze 1900–1945*, (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), p. 235.

<sup>41</sup> Hermann Muthesius, 'The Significance of Applied Art' (1907), in Frank (2000), p. 81.



theories had great influence on Italian intellectuals; as Felice declared in 1931, 'the applied arts have their justification in the use, thus in the everyday life, forming part of the material and spiritual context; they express the style, and represent the degree of civilisation [of a country]'.<sup>42</sup> The Monza Biennials aimed to define and disseminate the new style of modern Italy, in order to consistently improve the living and spiritual conditions of the Italian people.

Although attempts were made to display products in coherent spaces, the first two Biennials in 1923 and 1925 remained anchored to a regional approach, which highlighted folkloric and traditional components rather than modern ones. A different scenario emerged only in 1927. The four rooms of *Domus Nova*, the Piedmont section organised in *botteghe d'arte* (artistic shops), each curated by a different artist or architect, and the thematic rooms of the Roman and Liguria sections represented a remarkable advance, although not one devoid of flaws.<sup>43</sup> In his competition entry for the official exhibition poster, the design for a stained-glass panel, and the collaboration with Jesurum, Giulio Rosso, from the start, proposed approaches to renewing the applied arts that were informed by his awareness of their inextricable relationship with architecture.

Rosso's poster represented the unity of the arts, the ultimate goal of the Biennials. Designed in 1926 and entitled *Quirino II* (fig. 4.20), it was awarded the second prize and set to appear on the cover of the official catalogue, postcards, and stamps.<sup>44</sup> The jury's first choice was Marcello Nizzoli's *Veio II*, which represented an Etruscan potter decorating a vase (fig. 4.21). Evoking an archaeological repertoire, Nizzoli used another component promoted by the Biennial as essential for modern Italian applied arts design: the link with antique tradition. Rosso also focused on the theme of the artisan, representing a sculptor, a decorator, and a glassblower arranged in different poses around a Solomonic column. Rather than focusing on the connection with antiquity, however, Rosso highlighted the need for the decorative arts to find a synthesis with architecture, symbolised by the central column, around which the composition spirals. It was as a symbol of architecture that a column featured in a sculpture by Lelio Gelli

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<sup>42</sup> Carlo A. Felice, 'Arti decorative nell'architettura', *Domus*, 6 (1931), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Anty Pansera, *Storia e cronaca della Triennale*, (Milan: Longanesi, 1978), p. 190.

<sup>44</sup> AGR, press clippings, 'L'esito del concorso per il cartellone della III Biennale di Monza', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 14/06/1926.

(1902–1975), who modelled in clay in 1926 and rendered it in stone in 1928 for the façade of a building designed by Marcello Piacentini along the Lungotevere Tor di Nona in Rome (fig. 4.22).<sup>45</sup> Rosso probably knew the piece, having painted decorative murals in Piacentini's studio, located in the same building (cityscapes of the centres where the architect had been commissioned to carry out urban planning).<sup>46</sup>

The concept of a unified artistic mission to define the modern space was also suggested in the stained-glass panel *Parnaso* (Parnassus), made by Pietro Chiesa (1892–1948) and displayed at the same exhibition in 1927 (fig. 4.23).<sup>47</sup> The theme of the mythic home of the muses was interpreted by Rosso as a bucolic and festive encounter between personifications of the arts; the painter, instead of being in front of an easel, was up on scaffolding, engaged in mural decoration. Significantly, *Parnaso* was situated in a passage that connected the four rooms assigned to Gio Ponti and Emilio Lancia's (1890–1973) Domus Nova firm. Indeed, it was part of an ensemble specially arranged by Ponti, Lancia and Chiesa to display their line of more affordable, good quality pieces of furniture designed for La Rinascente Department Store as complete environments, ready to be bought and moved into the middle-class houses. Although some sources suggest that Rosso was involved in Domus Nova, it is likely that Chiesa (who worked with Ponti in the Il Labirinto design company) chose Rosso for the design because of the similarities between his approach and Ponti's.<sup>48</sup>

However, it was in the Jesurum room coordinated by Papini that Rosso had the chance to engage with a design that shaped the space, both through the decoration of architecture and through decorated objects. In addition to laceworks, Rosso designed mural decorations for two walls of the room, representing the *Legend of Lace* in five monochrome scenes, each provided with a label (fig. 4.24). Vittorio Jesurum had told Rosso the 'sweet and beautiful story', so that it could be 'be very nicely described by

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<sup>45</sup> The sculpture was entitled *Le tre Arti* and was published in *Domus*, 11 (1928), 29.

<sup>46</sup> 'Casa sul Lungotevere Tor di Nona in Roma', *Architettura*, 11 (1932), 587.

<sup>47</sup> On Pietro Chiesa see: Chloe Chelz, 'Pietro Chiesa and the Language of Modern Glass in Interwar Italy', *Journal of Glass Studies*, 53 (2011), 215–231.

<sup>48</sup> Adriana Filieri, 'Sala da pranzo Domus Nova', in Claudio Salsi (ed.), *Il mobile italiano nelle collezioni del Castello Sforzesco*, (Milan, Skira, 2006), pp. 109–110. Anty Pansera (Filieri's likely source) writes that 'the furniture was in tune with the decorations and stained-glass panel by Rosso', concluding that Ponti and Lancia had secured Rosso's cooperation. Pansera (1978), p. 194. Alberto Clementi had previously written that 'Ponti, Lancia, and the painter Giulio Rosso' had made furniture in accordance with economic and serial criteria. Clementi (1952), p. 183.

your lively colours, and by your imaginative fantasy.’<sup>49</sup> The story involved a Venetian sailor, who, before leaving his fiancée to fight the Turks, gave her a rare and beautiful sea plant. When the plant began to decay, the woman decided to reproduce it using the threads with which she wove nets for his relatives, all fishermen. The sequence of episodes served a clever marketing function by presenting Jesurum as the direct descendent of the Venetian lace tradition, as well as its sole moderniser. To confirm the message, a small booklet with the story was printed and distributed to the public. Here the legend was accompanied by the company’s brand-new logo, designed by Rosso, and consisting of the beautiful stylised figure of a young woman making spindle lace at her *tombolo* (cushion), with characteristic Venetian mooring poles and a ship in the distance (fig. 4.25).

Great care was spent on the arrangement of the room, which contained: two chairs, one oval table, two armchairs, a tea table, and a mirror designed by Papini and made by the Stefano Turri & Figli Company, under the supervision of Gio Ponti. A chandelier designed by the artist Napoleone Martinuzzi (1982–1977) and produced by Venini’s Vetri Soffiati Muranesi, completed the set.<sup>50</sup> The lacework was exhibited in two ways: some pieces were framed as pictures against black backgrounds with protective glass, and hung on the walls. Others were arranged on furniture (fig. 4.26). Papini wanted to emphasise the fact that these pieces, designed by a modern artist, could be displayed as refined works of art. At the same time, the pieces displayed on furniture showed customers how perfectly they fitted where tradition prescribed. The space had an ambiguous appearance. On the one hand, the display of lacework, and the wall decorations made it seem like a showroom. On the other hand, Rosso’s designs perfectly expressed ‘the use that each ornament ought to have in the bourgeois and aristocratic house’, demonstrating that the traditional art of lacework, when updated, could contribute as much as any other to the definition of a coherent modern interior, such as the one represented by Papini’s furniture.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 116, letter from Vittorio Jesurum to Giulio Rosso, 26/03/1927.

<sup>50</sup> Maria Cristina Tonelli Michail, ‘Progetti inusuali’, *Artista*, (1999), 168–169.

<sup>51</sup> AGR, press clippings, ‘Un Pittore: Giulio Rosso’, *Il Giornale dell’Isola*, 15/11/1926. The need to modernise the design of the art of lace in order to fit it in the ‘modern décor of the house’ is highlighted also by Lidia Morelli in her article ‘L’evoluzione delle trine’ [*Casabella*, 2 (1931), 38], where she identified in Rosso one of the few able to carry out such a task.

The anonymous critic of the *Il Giornale dell'Isola*, quoted above, while highlighting Rosso's awareness of the role that objects played within the domestic space of a private household, automatically associated them with a specific class. Indeed, the problem of a space defined by the design of the applied arts raised another pivotal question: for whom were these objects designed? Although critics and designers, especially those most influenced by the theoretical positions of William Morris, believed that it was necessary to make works of applied art available to ever larger audiences, in practice, such statements and programmes were ineffective.<sup>52</sup> The art critic Michele Biancale, reviewing the 1930 edition of the Triennale, asked himself 'for whose spaces is this stuff designed'; if the answer was the middle class – the critic continued – then 'these are houses that none could ever afford, and even if they could, they would never feel comfortable with them, because of the degree of finesse they require to be appreciated'.<sup>53</sup> Biancale was highlighting a paradox: modern artists, decorators, and architects were engaging with modern design by experimenting with new materials and innovative forms; however, the result was an object that was not only unaffordable for most people, but also unsuited to the conservative taste of the wealthy. Reporting on the modern applied arts in Italy, Yoï Maraini described a conversation that she had had with a businessperson who complained because 'he found the new form of Italian decorative arts too highbrow'.<sup>54</sup> The elite was the only possible clients for these refined pieces of modern applied art, a minority of people defined by their modern taste.

The Jesurum laceworks could not be made affordable to everybody: an extremely specialised manufacturing technique meant that each piece was unique. Documents kept in the Biennale Archive reveal the prices of pieces exhibited at the 1928 Venice Biennial: *The Sports* was valued at 6.000 lire; *The legend of lace* at 20.000.<sup>55</sup> As the average annual wage for a low grade civil servant was 8.353 lire in 1928, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, it is obvious that the Jesurum laces were luxury pieces of decorative art that only a few could afford to buy and display in their houses.<sup>56</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that Paolo Venini (1895–1959) asked that *Il Labirinto* be

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<sup>52</sup> Frank (2000), pp. 8–10.

<sup>53</sup> Michele Biancale, 'La IV Triennale di Monza', *Il Popolo di Roma*, 11/05/1930, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Yoï Maraini, 'The Modern Italians', *The Architectural Review*, 2 (1930), 104.

<sup>55</sup> ASAC, Fondo Attività 1894–1944, Busta 47, fasc. 'Prezzi bianco e nero/arti decorative', letter from Jesurum 03/05/28.

<sup>56</sup> Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Sommario di Statistiche Storiche dell'Italia 1861-1965*, (Naples: Istituto Poligrafico, 1965), p. 129

given the exclusive right to sell Rosso's laceworks.<sup>57</sup> *Il Labirinto* was an association of artists and architects headed by Gio Ponti, whose extremely refined pieces of decorative art and interior design schemes targeted the high bourgeoisie.<sup>58</sup> When *The Sports* and a star-shaped piece of lace were exhibited in Paris in 1935 in the decorative arts section (curated by Chiesa and Ponti) of the show *L'Art Italien des XIXe et XXe siècles*, the catalogue said the pieces had been lent by Mrs Clerici of Milan and countess Fiammetta Gaetani d'Aragona Sarfatti respectively.<sup>59</sup> Mrs Clerici may well have been Rachele, the affluent founder of the Clerici Tessuti Company, which manufactured silk fabrics. The Countess was critic Margherita Sarfatti's daughter; she had probably been given the lace (exhibited at the Monza Biennial of 1927, of which Margherita was a curator) by her mother. This new form of 'artistic lacework' could be appreciated only by those who could afford it and were interested in modern design.

Another known buyer of Jesurum products designed by Rosso was the Ministry of Education, which bought the pair of filet laceworks displayed on armchairs at the 1927 Monza Biennial, probably for an educational purpose.<sup>60</sup> The acquisition activity of a Ministry of the authoritarian regime shows how Fascism continued a custom from the years of the democratic government. It developed this practice to affirm its role as a powerful patron of the arts, thus shaping and directing the tendencies and objectives of practitioners in the field. The regime's engagement with the debate around the modernisation of the applied arts influenced the spaces for which they were designed. Instead of disappearing into the mansions of private collectors, arts and crafts were now diverted towards a public space, to represent the new fascist state. By the middle of the 1930s, Rosso's involvement in designing small decorative objects for private interiors became more sporadic, while, at the same time, he engaged more and more with traditional architectural techniques. Alongside some of Rosso's Jesurum laceworks, a mosaic panel made by Salviati of Venice from his design was displayed at the 1938 ENAPI

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<sup>57</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Papini, fasc. 116, letter from Mario Jesurum to Papini, 10/06/1927.

<sup>58</sup> The other collaborators of *Il Labirinto* were Tomaso Buzzi, Emilio Lancia, Michele Marelli, Paolo Venini, and Carla Visconti.

<sup>59</sup> Musée des écoles étrangères contemporaines, *L'Art Italien des XIXe et XXe siècles, Jeu de Paume des Tuileries, May–July 1935*, (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1935), p. 143, n. 316.

<sup>60</sup> Marangoni (1927), p. 64.

exhibition in Buenos Aires, showing that he had been experimenting with techniques aimed to the decoration of public spaces on a massive scale.<sup>61</sup>

In this context, the lacework panels for the Café Motta of Piazza Duomo in Milan (1933) represent an interesting and original case. This project has a hybrid nature, involving the use of a genre of furniture-related applied art (lacework) as architectural decoration within a public space (a tea room) that was the result of a private, commercial initiative. The patisserie and tearoom, designed by architect Melchiorre Bega (1898–1976), was Motta's most important venue in Milan. Rosso designed the cartoons for wall mosaics decorating the bar (discussed in Chapter 5), as well as for curtains, tablecloths and wall panels woven by Jesurum for the room called *dei ricami* ('of the embroideries') (figs. 4.27, 4.28).<sup>62</sup> The lacework presented imaginative vertical compositions animated by birds, plants, musical instruments, glasses, profile heads, hands, chessboards, stars, grapes, dragonflies, and horses. They were made in hemp, a humble material that was difficult to work with but Italian in origin, to comply with propagandistic directives anticipating the 1935 autarchy.

The unity of the ensemble was secured through recurrent motifs disseminated on the walls, tablecloths, napkins, and curtains. On the walls, the delicate relief of the embroideries created a look that was midway between wallpaper and stuccowork. Evidently, Bega considered this peculiar texture as a real asset for enhancing the character of the space. However, the interest of the scheme lay not only in the unusual application of the lacework, but also in the design of very well-orchestrated compositions, full of verve, fantasy, expressive forms, and variations (fig. 4.29). Rosso did not follow the narrative approach typical of mural decoration, although he had already experimented with 'narrative lacework' (*The legend of lace*, exhibited in Venice in 1928). Instead, a convivial theme, conveyed through repeated patterns of bottles, glasses, and musical instruments, was given a visionary, almost surreal translation. Ambiguous planes, cuts, and voids annulled the illusion of volume and depth created by foreshortened objects, recalling Cubism's fragmented still lifes. Rosso focused on the forms, playing with the flow of lines, evocative and ambiguous shapes, and above all,

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<sup>61</sup> *Exposición Italiana de Arte Decorativo*, (Buenos Aires: CGFF, 1938), pp. 41, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Elsa Jesurum complained about the name of the room: the panels were laceworks, not embroideries. She credited Bega as the inventor of the lace wall decoration, while mentioning Rosso as the designer of the panels. Letter to Papini, 08/05/1934, BBT, Fondo Papini, fasc. 13.112.

with the contrast between full and empty surfaces made possible by the endless gradation between different warps in the lace. The polished, exact curves of his Art Deco compositions lost tension and became flaky, trembling lines without energy. The grotesque and expressive nature of these compositions must have been greatly enhanced by the striking contrast between the red background and the diaphanous lace, unfortunately lost in the black and white photographs of the space. Encouraged by the private and exceptional nature of the commission, and the chance to experiment with an unusual medium, Rosso relinquished any creative restraint: these compositions are among the freest and more original and intriguing that he ever designed.

The use of lacework in mural decorations received a wide response but had no imitators.<sup>63</sup> During the 1930s, Rosso engaged with some of the applied arts that had traditionally rivalled with mural decoration, designing the two tapestries for the 1936 and 1940 Milanese Triennials and a curtain for the *Palestra del Duce* (Mussolini's private gym) at the Foro Mussolini.<sup>64</sup> Together with the stained-glass window for the E42, entitled *Elements of Astronomy*, these represent Rosso's response to the co-option of the applied arts to shape the public space of the regime (examined in more depth in Chapter 7). To show how the question involved the decorative practice in its diverse applications, I examine Rosso's *Tricolore* tapestry (fig. 4.30), which was exhibited at the 1936 Triennale of Milan, and woven by Mrs Caterina Rampolla del Tindaro, a Sicilian aristocrat living in Rome.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, I am convinced that this tapestry was based on the entry that Rosso designed the previous year for a competition to design a wall mosaic for the new railway station of Reggio Emilia.

The competition panel required cartoons that had to celebrate the proclamation of the *tricolore* as the Italian national flag. Rosso came second place, leaving the artist with a design that was probably recycled for the tapestry (the vertical shape and proportions are the same as those of the mosaic panel later implemented).<sup>66</sup> The scene illustrated the symbolism associated with the colours (green, white, and red as metaphors for

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<sup>63</sup> 'Alcuni particolari d'arredamento nelle sale da tè Motta di Milano', *Domus*, 3 (1934), 36.

<sup>64</sup> Rosso had engaged with the design of tapestries since the beginning of his career: a postcard in the AGR, signed by him in August 1923, shows a cartoon that was later identified by Scarpa as a design for a tapestry. GNAM, Scarpa (1926).

<sup>65</sup> *Guida della VI Triennale*, (Milan: SAME, 1936), p. 114.

<sup>66</sup> AGR, press clippings, 'Il pittore A. Grandi vincitore del concorso per la decorazione della nuova stazione', *Il Solco Fascista – Reggio Emilia*, 08/08/1935.

Italy's grasslands, the perennial snow on the Alps, and the blood shed by patriots fighting for independence, respectively), with the interesting insertion of a slope with flames at the bottom. This last detail recalls a speech made by the poet Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912) in Reggio Emilia in 1897. Pascoli evoked 'the colours of our spring and of our country, from Mount Cenisio to Etna; the snow of the alps, the April of the plains; the flames of the volcanos', associating the latter with the blood of patriots.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, the original sketch for the Reggio Emilia station has been lost, and it is impossible to say whether Rosso made any changes when adapting it to tapestry. However, the composition woven by Rampolla has a distinct character: the figures are sketchy, spirited, and almost abstract, as if to enhance the chromatic values of the piece, as well as the decorative rhythm of the stitches. Not by chance, *Tricolore* was the only piece designed by Rosso included in rationalist architect Giuseppe Pagano's survey of Italian modern decorative arts.<sup>68</sup>

In comparison, both *Le Portatrici di frutta* ('the Fruit bearers'), designed in 1939–40 and woven by Pio and Silvio Erolì under the patronage of the Triennale (fig. 4.31), and the stained-glass *Elementi dell'Astronomia* created for the E42 in 1941 (fig. 4.32) present a much more figurative approach. The difference can be explained when the destinations of these pieces are considered.<sup>69</sup> The stained-glass window was meant to decorate the staircase of the Science Museum in the World Exhibition fairground; it therefore had an educational function. Rosso adopted a style that would allow the viewer to 'read' the references to astronomical theories, instruments, and iconographies.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, while dressing his *Fruit bearers* in clothes inspired by the traditional costumes of women of the small villages on the hills of Lazio and Abruzzo, Rosso may have had in

<sup>67</sup> Giosuè Carducci, *7 gennaio 1897: Per il Tricolore*, (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1897).

<sup>68</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, *Arte decorativa italiana*, (Milan: Hoepli, 1938), pp. 26, 109.

<sup>69</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Un arazzo', *Domus*, 6 (1940), 72. A sketch kept in the AGR reveals that *Le Portatrici di frutta* was a detail of a larger composition representing a colourful, vernal fantasy. Rosso might have taken inspiration from the illustrations of Gino Massano's *Grazie e Splendori dei Costumi Italiani* (Rome: Morpurgo, 1930), a photo-book of typical Italian local costumes, which was among those he brought to Brazil. The tapestry is the only piece of applied art by Rosso of which the recent fate is known: until 2011, it was in the collection of the art dealer Raffaele Verolino, Modena; in 2009, it was exhibited at the MercanteinFiera show in Parma. Alessio de Cristofaro and Maria Paola Maino, 'Le arti applicate al MercanteinFiera di autunno', *Forme Moderne*, 3 (2009), 12–39.

<sup>70</sup> This work is among the handful of Rosso's pieces whose iconography has been analysed in depth. See Rossella Siligato, 'Museo delle Scienze – la decorazione' and Patrizia Rosazza, 'Giulio Rosso – elementi decorativi relativi all'astronomia', in Maurizio Calvesi, Enrico Guidoni, and Simonetta Lux (eds.), *E42: Utopia e Scenario del Regime*, (Venice: Marsilio, 1987), pp. 403–406, 412–414. The stained glass, made by the Giuliani Company of Rome in 1942, was installed only in 1983. The building now hosts the Museo Nazionale Preistorico-Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini".



mind the commissions for the Folklore Museum that was being built just in front of the Science Museum in the E42 area. When the original sketch for the Reggio Emilia railway station was turned down, it was reused for a tapestry exhibited at an international show. In that context, it was essential to showcase a modern style of décor, and the original cartoon might have been re-worked to match expectations. These examples of Rosso's monumental applied art confirm that the fundamental aim of his decorative practice, be it on a domestic or monumental scale, was always its harmonious fusion with the spatial context.

#### **4.3 The applied arts within the fascist regime: Rosso's collaboration with the ENAPI (1930–1936)**

The collaboration between Rosso and the ENAPI, documented from 1930 onward, raises questions about the role of the applied arts within the cultural policies implemented by the fascist regime. The ENAPI was founded on 14 May 1925 as a public body whose main scope was to assist, support, and intervene in the Italian artistic manufacturing sector.<sup>71</sup> It offered financial credit, technical-artistic advice, and commercial promotion in Italy and abroad. When, in 1927, artist Giovanni Guerrini (1887–1972) became head of the public body (a role he kept until 1945), the ENAPI received a boost, becoming one of the most active players in the development of the applied arts in Italy for the next fifteen years. Due to its government connection, the ENAPI's direction responded to the requirements dictated by the ever-changing political agenda of the regime. Its output, largely neglected by art historical studies, offers a crucial insight into the relationship between the politics and arts of that period.<sup>72</sup>

Under the guidance of Guerrini, the ENAPI encouraged artists and architects to become involved in the design of traditional crafts, convinced that the resulting collaborations was 'at the origin of the splendour of the most glorious centuries of our art.'<sup>73</sup> While some collaborated occasionally with craftspeople, others, like Rosso, did so consistently

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<sup>71</sup> ENAPI, *Prodotti Italiani di Intreccio*, (Florence: Vallecchi, 1932), p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> The only historical research on the ENAPI is Roberto Badas and Paola Frattani, *50 anni di arte decorativa in Italia – l'ENAPI dal 1925 al 1975*, (Rome: Re.Co.Grafica, 1976). In September 2015, I was given permission to investigate some archival materials relating to the ENAPI kept in the Biblioteca di Belle Arti (BBA) of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e Turismo in Rome. They had never been checked before.

<sup>73</sup> ENAPI, *L'ENAPI all IV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Decorativa e Industriale*, (Rome: Squarci, 1930), unpaginated (p. 3).

throughout the 1930s. Rosso was asked to provide designs for manufacturers all over the country, allowing him to widen his experience as a lacework and furniture designer.<sup>74</sup> In this phase of his career, his output must be compared with that of other designers, such as Tomaso Buzzi, Francesco Di Cocco (1900–1989), Eugenio Fegarotti (1903–1973), Gino Frattani (1918–2005), Virgilio Guzzi (1902–1978), Ernesto Puppo (1904–1987), Emanuele Rambaldi (1903–1968), and Umberto Zimelli (1898–1972). Some of these men, such as Diego Cernelutti, Mario Giampieri, and Mario Romano, have left little trace in the record. Researchers studying the others have often neglected their contributions to the decorative arts. Instead of a leading personality, there seems to have been a reciprocal influence, facilitated by the fact that they often worked for the same manufacturers and had the chance to see each other's work at the Triennials, the *mostre mercato* and *campionarie*, and in the ENAPI show rooms on via Veneto in Rome. Although they came from different backgrounds, the output of the ENAPI artists, especially throughout the 1930s, was remarkably uniform.

The ENAPI promoted the production of different typologies of objects. On the one hand, expensive, high-quality pieces were needed to illustrate the excellence of Italian technique and design. On the other hand, more affordable and less sophisticated productions often involving the use of humbler, new, and artificial materials, and simpler ornamental motifs were also promoted to show that they were suitable for common use and not just for exhibitions. These diverse trends are evident in Rosso's contribution to the ENAPI at the 1933 fifth Triennale of Decorative Arts in Milan, where he provided designs for Jesurum, Mrs Ginna Marcelli of Sansepolcro, Mrs Jole Bianchini of Florence, the Manifattura di Cantù, and the Industrie Femminili di Trieste. One example of an exclusive production was a group of laceworks designed for the Manifatture di Cantù, in particular a set of table runners (*servizio Americano*), which featured a dynamic and agitated composition with men, horses, little umbrellas, and fork-shaped birds (fig. 4.33).<sup>75</sup> A precious tablecloth designed for Mrs Bianchini and made in silver lace with an unconventional combination of abstract geometric forms,

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<sup>74</sup> Badas and Frattani list the manufacturers with which Rosso collaborated. Surprisingly, they name none of those mentioned in the catalogues and articles of the time (Jesurum apart), while including others whose collaboration with Rosso has left no further trace: for fabric/lace F.lli Borab, Palermo; Maria Desiderio, Pescocostanzo; Zita Faggiani, Torino; Letizia Gavagnin Romagnoli, Venice. For pieces of furniture: ebanisteria Puccetti, Bologna; ditta Alberghini, Pieve di Cento. Badas (1976), p. 274.

<sup>75</sup> Ugo Nebbia, 'Il palazzo dell'arte', *Lidel*, 6 (1933), 41; *Quinta Triennale di Milano*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1933), p. 387; 'I lavori femminili alla Triennale', *Domus*, 7 (1933), 390.

birds, and plants (fig. 4.34)<sup>76</sup> and a set of table runners designed for Ginna Marcelli in bobbin lace, with a dynamic composition that featured foxes chasing chickens and dogs hunting a stag (fig. 4.35), were inspired by the same approach.<sup>77</sup> The samples shown by Jesurum were completely different. Firstly, they were not laceworks, but green, violet, and grey linen tablecloths with white embroidery. Secondly, they featured minimalist designs consisting of small details: an arch with a tree, a postal horn, birds, a bow with arrows, Pegasus, an angel, and cornucopias (fig. 4.36).<sup>78</sup> Others merely displayed fine openwork embroidery connecting vertical or diagonal bands of linen. Two small tablecloths for babies with matching napkins and a bib woven by Laura Colarieti Tosti in 1931 presented extremely stylised, almost infantile, motifs of stems with small leaves and flowers, houses, trees, modes of transport, and animals (fig. 4.37).<sup>79</sup> Such products sold for more affordable prices, and could be rapidly reproduced if demand exceeded stock.

Rosso's furniture design provide another example of the range of different objectives set by the ENAPI. For the fourth Triennale in 1930, the decorator designed a tea table, whose wooden structure (made by Angelo Molino) supported a top decorated with a highly geometrised motif involving a still life with bottles, rendered in *scagliola* by Felice Gnocchi (fig. 4.38).<sup>80</sup> The *scagliola* (a composite substance made from selenite, glue, and natural pigments) was a seventeenth century traditional technique for producing inlay surfaces that imitated the expensive *pietra dura*. Out of fashion since the end of the nineteenth century, its revival was promoted as a way to enhance a traditional craft 'which could bear extremely beautiful fruit', while guaranteeing affordability.<sup>81</sup> At the sixth Triennale in 1936, the ENAPI displayed a solid four-legged table whose top had been made of *pietra dura* by Alessandro Giombini (fig. 4.39).<sup>82</sup> This time, Rosso's design was used to create an extremely refined and precious piece.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> ENAPI, *Artigianato d'Italia*, (Rome: Squarci, 1934), unpaginated.

<sup>77</sup> 'L'ENAPI alla V Triennale', *Domus*, 5 (1933), 262.

<sup>78</sup> See photograph in GNAM, Archivio Bio-Iconografico, fasc. 'Giulio Rosso'; Nebbia (1933), 39; Roberto Papini, 'La V Triennale di Milano. Ispezione alle Arti', *Emporium*, 468 (1933), 179.

<sup>79</sup> 'Ricami moderni italiani dell'ENAPI', *Domus*, 11 (1931), 78–81.

<sup>80</sup> ENAPI (1930), unpaginated (pp. 25, 61).

<sup>81</sup> 'Produzione Artigiana', *Domus*, 73 (1934), 17.

<sup>82</sup> Guida (1936), pp. 114, 120; *Settima Triennale di Milano – attribuzione delle ricompense*, (Milan: SAME, 1940), p. 24.

<sup>83</sup> ENAPI, *L'Artigianato d'Italia alla VI Triennale di Milano*, (Milan: Maggioni, 1936), n. 12.

In terms of design, these objects reveal the high degree of freedom to experiment enjoyed by designers who collaborated with the ENAPI. Visual elements drawn from the propaganda of the regime, such as fasces, she-wolves, flags, and banners, were rarely used; they never appear in Rosso's ENAPI production. Even when it would have been extremely easy to work a celebration to Fascism and its *Duce* into one of his themes, Rosso refrained from any obvious reference. The wallpaper sample exhibited in the ENAPI gallery at the 1930 Monza Triennial, for instance, was an *hommage* to the city of Rome (fig. 4.40). As will be discussed at length in Chapter 7, the myth of Rome was central to the ideology of Fascism. However, Rosso's wallpaper does not participate in a narrative of imperial primacy. It is a collage of various silhouetted landmarks: St. Peter's Basilica, the Colosseum, Constantine's Arch, the domes of the twin churches of the Piazza del Popolo, Palazzo Venezia, Borromini's spiral dome for St. Ivo alla Sapienza, and the spire of Santa Maria dei Miracoli.<sup>84</sup> Fascist Rome is evoked by the presence of the Palazzo Venezia, the Renaissance palace that was for decades the residence of the Austrian ambassador before being requisitioned during World War I, and then chosen by Mussolini as his office in 1922. Apart from this rather subtle inclusion, the theme is treated by Rosso in a playful and non-rhetorical way. All of the religious buildings are stripped of their symbolic references – the cross on top of St Ivo's dome is replaced with a weathercock. Instead of eagles, fasces, and legionary's insignia, the composition is given rhythm by the silhouetted dark shapes of maritime pines, the pale outline of water jets from Rome's baroque fountains, and the vertical forms of three obelisks. Forms are simplified, to enhance their decorative value, while the collage-like appearance of the ensemble retains an utterly modern aspect.

The rarity of references to Fascism in the iconographies used in applied arts in respect to contemporary architectural decoration, has driven some scholars to consider them a 'unique domain where a true and real possibility of free expression was allowed in Italy during the fascist period'.<sup>85</sup> This assertion is based on a fundamental confusion between stylistic experimentation and free expression. In Chapter 7, I will show how Fascism favoured a climate of aesthetic pluralism in the visual arts and architecture, which allowed artists and architects to respond favourably to its patronage, and neutralised

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<sup>84</sup> Archivio Storico della Triennale di Milano (ASTM), Fondo Fotografico, IV Triennale – 1930, f. 124.

<sup>85</sup> Cogeval, Guy and Avanzi, Beatrice (eds.), *Una dolce vita? Dal Liberty al design italiano 1900–1940*, (Ginevra–Milan: Skira, 2015), p. 10.

discontent. Nevertheless, no works with themes that could be interpreted as critical of the regime could be produced: censorship operated on all forms of expression, and there was no exception made for the applied arts. The fact that there are few references to the catalogue of typical fascist symbols does not mean that this area was, in any way, excluded from the pervasive control of Fascism.

A booklet edited by the Ministry of Education in 1933, illustrating the contribution of the Art Schools to an exhibition of modern interiors, stated that the present time was 'an epoch that grants to the so-called minor arts an importance even greater than to the fine, or major, arts'.<sup>86</sup> The volume *Dix années d'art en Italie, 1922–1932*, written in French and published in Paris in 1933, was intended as a catalogue of the most significant artistic expressions produced in Italy during the first ten years of dictatorship. It included examples of applied arts, alongside the fine arts.<sup>87</sup> Rosso's 1930 design for Ginna Marcelli was featured, together with one by Giovanni Guerrini, a balustrade by Antonio Maraini, and a metal fence by Ernesto Puppo. None of them displayed openly propagandistic references. They had another purpose: to showcase, for a cosmopolitan audience, objects that embodied Fascism's cultural programme by reviving traditional local crafts, material, and techniques and matching them with modern designs – thus being 'traditional and modern at the same time', as Mussolini had famously prescribed.<sup>88</sup>

The regime achieved its propagandistic aims by displaying technical perfection, modern design, exportability, and competitiveness in international markets. Questions of 'national prestige and the testimony of our civilisation' were included in the catalogue of the Fourth Triennial of Monza.<sup>89</sup> Although the international decorative arts Biennials/Triennials were initially intended to provide opportunities to learn from foreign examples, this aim gave way to fierce competition for primacy and prestige. The ENAPI followed suit. From 1930 onwards, all of its publications were written in Italian, English, French, and German; alongside showrooms in Rome, Florence, and Venice (the country's main tourist centres), shops were opened in Amsterdam, Brussels,

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<sup>86</sup> Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale, *Mostra dell'arredamento artistico. Produzione dei regi istituti e scuole d'arte*, (Rome: Squarci, 1933), p. 2. The cover of the booklet was designed by Rosso.

<sup>87</sup> Emilio Bodrero M., *Dix années d'art en Italie, 1922–1932*, (Paris: Chronique du Jour, 1933), pl. 113.

<sup>88</sup> Speech held at the Academy of Fine Arts of Perugia, 5 October 1926.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in: Pansera (1978), p. 36.

Copenhagen, and Paris.<sup>90</sup> The body developed an extraordinarily active presence in international exhibitions and fairs: Paris, Leipzig, Athens, Vienna, Amsterdam, Brussels, San Paolo, Buenos Aires, Tripoli, Addis Ababa, and New York in 1939. Its participation was equally consistent in Italy, where the ENAPI gallery became a constant feature of the Triennials (from 1927 onwards), Biennali in Venice (from 1932), commercial fairs in Milan, Bari, and Tripoli, and commemorative and promotional exhibitions (Turin 1928; Mostre Nazionali dell'Artigianato).<sup>91</sup>

Some of these events reflected shifts in the general policy of the regime, such as the participation of the ENAPI in the first international exhibition of Christian religious art, held in Padua in 1931. In 1929, Mussolini and the Vatican representatives had signed the Lateran Pacts, resolving tensions created by the conquest of Rome in 1871 and the self-inflicted exile of Pius IX. In doing so, Mussolini rejected the anti-clerical stance of the original fascist movement, adopting a more tolerant strategy aimed at gaining Catholic support. The Padua exhibition must be considered in the context of this new climate of allegiance to the Vatican (Pius XI described Mussolini as a 'man sent by Providence'). The ENAPI set up a small chapel and provided all of its furnishing, from the architecture to clerical paraphernalia. Rosso's designs were used to embroider a small umbrella for extreme unction (*viatico*), and tulle decorations for the borders and sleeves of three different types of *abito corale* (cassock): a *rocchetto*, a surplice, and an alb (figs. 4.41, 4.42).<sup>92</sup> The reference to the iconography of the Passion is unique in Rosso's inter-war oeuvre, which includes less than a handful of works with a religious theme. This example shows why fascist art policies should not be assessed merely in terms of their ability to enforce the use of direct iconographic references to the regime. Other directives ensured that the applied arts served the regime in indirect ways, including the ENAPI's involvement in the definition of modern religious applied arts in Padua.

The fascist government's commitment to supporting and promoting small manufacturers and artisans through the activities of the ENAPI was primarily designed to make them competitive in the international market. Guerrini, by ruling out references

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<sup>90</sup> ENAPI, *Sale di Esposizione*, (Rome: ENAPI, 1934).

<sup>91</sup> Irene de Guttry, and Maria Paola Maino, *Il mobile déco italiano: 1920–1940*, (Bari: Laterza, 1988), pp. 25–28.

<sup>92</sup> ENAPI, *L'Ente Nazionale per l'Artigianato e le Piccole Industrie alla Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Sacra Moderna*, (Rome: Squarci, 1931) pp. 69, 79, 84, 88.

to the dominant ideology (which he supported), displayed an awareness of the needs of both the regime and ENAPI associates: the priority was to sell the objects. An explicit political connotation would have made it harder to sell Italian applied arts on the profitable international markets. As they competed with products from all over the world, these products had to express their *Italianità* in subtle ways, rather than through open political propaganda. In 1930, Ponti explained how the Italian applied arts could express their provenance and identity: by re-interpreting traditional canons – a ‘wonderful example: the Jesurum laceworks designed by Giulio Rosso’, he wrote – and perfecting modern design and technique.<sup>93</sup> Two years later, Ponti explained in more detail his recipe for designs that had ‘good modernity’ in the ‘feminine’ applied arts: ‘finesse, grace (not sentimentality), elegance, precious simplicity, virtuosic execution, and healthy dignity’.<sup>94</sup> In Ponti’s discourse, qualities relating to technical process and creative design are clearly mixed with morality. It could not be otherwise, given the role played by the decorative arts as the visual and material expression of national civilisation. Explicit propaganda on the surface of ceramics, glasses, tapestries, or laceworks was neither asked for nor needed: as expressions of perfection, ‘springing from the art of the past, yet [with] vitality all its own’, these objects could only have been produced by the genius of Italian people, revitalised by the ‘fascist spirit’.<sup>95</sup> As such they would ‘characterise, for centuries, this glorious age of Mussolini’, as Piero Gazzotti hoped presenting *Cellini*, the new magazine of artisans’ associated with the ENAPI.<sup>96</sup> Because of these implications, the applied arts of the period have been first forgotten, and then recently exhibited neglecting the context in which they were embedded.

Far from being a mere bureaucratic structure, the ENAPI performed a strategic role within the cultural policies of the regime. Its actions embodied the contradictory nature of Fascism’s intervention in the arts. On the one hand, it prompted renewal and experimentation in forms and materials. On the other hand, it avoided reforms that would have turned artists into industrial designers, or emancipated artisans from their dependency on the artists. One of the most vocal critics of the ENAPI, especially because of the collaborations it promoted between artists and artisans, was Raffaello Giolli.

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<sup>93</sup> Gio Ponti, ‘Il fattore italianità nelle nostre arti applicate’, *Domus*, 11 (1930), 33–34.

<sup>94</sup> Gio Ponti, ‘Le industrie femminili alla futura triennale di milano’, *Domus*, 4 (1932), 225–227.

<sup>95</sup> Maraini (1930), 104.

<sup>96</sup> Piero Gazzotti, ‘Nel nome, la consegna’, *Cellini*, 1 (1941), 7.

According to him, the best way to renew the applied arts was to provide artisans with the means to become the designers of their own craft.<sup>97</sup> Drawing on the experience of his wife Rosa Menni (1889–1977), a trained artist who had dedicated herself to the design and production of textiles, Giolli wanted to empower the makers; he believed that the approach championed by the ENAPI was reinforcing the traditional hierarchical relationship between arts and crafts, rather than resolving it.<sup>98</sup>

However, this hierarchy could hardly be questioned within the corporative state set up by the fascist regime. Artists and artisans were framed in distinct categories and belonged to different union organisations. In particular, according to *Cellini*, the crafts represented the ‘perfect corporative nucleus, the perfect productive civilisation. The spiritual component that emanates from the artistry of the crafts makes them one of the most powerful agents of civil conservation and affirmation.’<sup>99</sup> The crafts represented for Fascism a laboratory in which to experiment with its corporative economic organisation. The operational model championed by the ENAPI, the main sector exhibitions, and the majority of operators, including Giulio Rosso, were perfectly integrated into the authoritarian and totalitarian system that Fascism was establishing.

Rather than imposing elements of its narrative, Fascism influenced the applied arts in a number of different ways. It pushed manufacturers, through the ENAPI, to experiment with new materials, diversify their potential buyers, revive old-fashioned techniques, re-interpret old motifs, support traditional crafts, and promote and sell Italian products in international markets, encouraging insiders to become representatives of Italy’s new imperial ambitions. In 1933, Ponti confidently stated that ‘the Italian artistic production, thanks to the involvement of artists and architects, [...] aspires to a candidacy for primacy in the world’.<sup>100</sup> Some of these actions had the deleterious effect of spreading a culture imbued with nationalism, aggressive imperialism, and (after 1938) racism, while reinforcing hierarchical distinctions and the dependency of artisans on the artists’ design. There was also a positive outcome: Italian design was modernised and projected

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<sup>97</sup> Raffello Giolli, ‘L’artigianato al bivio’, *Colosseo*, 10 (1933), 140–144.

<sup>98</sup> Rosa Menni was one of a number of women designer/makers who made an important contribution to the development of Italian textile arts, demonstrating also a remarkable entrepreneurship. Although the activity of many women was supported by the ENAPI, there is no known case of a woman designer providing designs for a male artisan.

<sup>99</sup> Guido Gamberini, ‘Premessa spirituale’, *Cellini*, 9 (1942), 3–4.

<sup>100</sup> Gio Ponti, ‘1933/34’, *Domus*, 72 (1933), 623.



into an international context, where it was often admired. The French critic Louis Cheronet, reviewing the Italian Pavilion at the 1935 World Exhibition in Brussels, asked himself whether what he called the '*stile propaganda*' displayed by the Italian applied arts, 'with its poetry closer to our time', was more effective than the 'commission-exportation' approach that characterised the French and British pavilions.<sup>101</sup> While dispelling any possible doubt as to whether the fascist cultural policy involved the applied arts, regardless of iconography, Cheronet's observations show how seductive its productions could be, even in contexts outside its direct control.

## Conclusion

In his review of the 1930 fourth Biennial of Decorative Arts, Carlo A. Felice, secretary of the event, stated that Rosso 'with his spirit, had contributed substantially to our current ornamental art'.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, just as his output has been neglected by the post-war art historical literature, so has his contribution to the development of a decorative language for the Italian modern applied arts. Here, I offer a comparative stylistic analysis of Rosso's works, highlighting models to which his visual language was exposed, as well as his possible influence on other contemporary designers.

Rosso's designs for the applied arts (especially embroideries) modernised traditional repertoires to reflect the streamlined, geometrical neoclassicism championed by Gio Ponti and his closest collaborators, above all, Tomaso Buzzi.<sup>103</sup> As seen in Chapter 3, that language had been successfully used in other applied arts by designers such as Stella and Andlovitz. Traces of this language can be seen in a drawing by Rosso dated 1932, kept in the Levi-Morenos collection and made for a lacework that has not been traced (fig. 4.43). It represents a garden with a composite fountain basin in the middle, two obelisks on the sides, and flowers, snakes, and fishes spread around. This architectural fantasy shows clearly the links between Rosso and Ponti's entourage, above all Buzzi, whose playful compositions used many elements of classical architecture; these were constantly repeated on the objects he designed and exhibited (see the mirror presented at the 1936 Triennial of Milan, fig. 4.44). A tendency to ornament fabrics with compositions of (apparently) casually chosen small objects was common to both Buzzi

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<sup>101</sup> Louis Cheronet, 'Pavillons étrangers', *Art et Décoration*, vol. II (1935), 323.

<sup>102</sup> Carlo A. Felice, *Arte Decorativa 1930*, (Milan: Ceschina, 1930), p. 19.

<sup>103</sup> Clementi (1952), p. 225.

(fig. 4.45) and Rosso (fig. 4.46). The grotesque profiles looming from the vertical panels of the Motta embroidery room, drew on solutions that Rosso had experimented since 1930 (in the illustrations for *Il Dono di Natale* by Grazia Deledda, fig. 4.47), but also recall contemporary works by Ponti and Buzzi. The 1932 banner of the Ospedale Nuovo in Milan (fig. 4.48), and the illustrations for the *Quattrova Illustrato*, a cookbook edited and published by Ponti and Buzzi in 1931 feature elongated and spirited heads similar to Rosso's.<sup>104</sup> Echoes of this style can be found also in Umberto Zimelli's cameo for Giuseppe Scarfogliero (1933) (fig. 4.49).

Traces of the influence that Rosso's 1927 designs for Jesurum had on other designers working for the ENAPI were evident at the 1930 Triennial of Milan and the 1931 Padua exhibition. Designs by Mario Giampieri for Pia di Valmarana and Clementina Medici (figs. 4.50, 4.51), and by Diego Cernelutti for Ida Motta (fig. 4.52) reveal a similar approach, both in the choice of theme (tennis players, micro landscapes, arabesques of thin segmented structures associated with plants, flowers, and small figurines), and style. In mosaics of the same period and in a lacework, Guerrini adopted decorative motifs (the branch with leaves) and the angular stylised figures that so often recur in Rosso, Ponti and Buzzi's schemes, referring to creations of the Wiener Werkstätte (fig. 4.53). From the beginning of the 1930s, Rosso dropped the Art Deco cadences of the previous decade. His embroideries begun to feature compositions involving arrows, comets, helicoid ribbons, stylised flowers, and doves arranged side by side, as he investigated the possible associations of straight and curved lines and flat and tri-dimensional forms (fig. 4.54). These compositions would go on to influence Diego Cernelutti's 1933 designs for the Scuola di Pedrazzo (fig. 4.55). Those designed by Rosso for Ginna Marcelli in 1933 (fig. 4.56), with their weightless, agitated figurines and umbrellas, are similar to figures in the equestrian circus designed by Francesco di Cocco for a circular doily made by Melville & Ziffer in 1930 (fig. 4.57). A clearer picture of reciprocal influences and the impact that so many good ENAPI designers had on the visual language of the Italian decorative arts during the interwar period will emerge as the activity of the body will be investigated in more depth. Here, it is important to highlight how Rosso facilitated a

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<sup>104</sup> Grazia Deledda, *Il Dono di Natale*, (Milan: Treves, 1930); Quattrova, E. V., *Il Quattrova illustrato, ovvero la cucina elegante*, (Milan: Domus, 1931).

mediation between the novelties introduced in Milan by artists and architects aware of international tendencies, and the ENAPI designers, who worked mainly in Rome.

In terms of quality, Rosso's laceworks and embroidery designs are among the best interwar Italian productions. The 1920s laceworks for Jesurum revolutionised the approach to traditional technique, opening the way for other designers to engage with prestigious firms and enabling national productions to compete on the European market. The best examples are characterised by an extraordinary freedom of invention, dynamism, attention to detail, and mastery of the whole composition. Throughout the 1930s, while demands increased and diversified, Rosso still managed to design exceptional pieces, such as those woven by Ginna Marcelli, who may have been the craftsman behind the tablecloth with a hunting scene whose photograph is kept in Rosso's archive (fig. 4.58). Above all, the incredible lacework panels for the Café' Motta embroidery room stand out. Unfortunately, the photographic evidence does not allow an analysis of his furniture design, which hint at a geometric disassembling and representational synthesis, whose matrix is avant-gardist.

Rosso's ability to reuse styles and languages is evident in his poster for the Venice Biennial of 1928. Previous designers had either reproduced touristic postcards on a larger scale (1924, and to a certain extent the 1926 poster, with the Palazzo Ducale's façade and reflection framed in a rich baroque frame) or evoked the glorious past of the *Serenissima* (Giulio Cisari's 1922 poster). Rosso's interpretation rejected the usual picturesque undertones. To visualize the turn that Antonio Maraini, freshly appointed Secretary of the Exhibition, wanted to implement, Rosso humorously challenged the traditionally decadent view of the *Serenissima*. He associated an orthogonal aerial view of the Palazzo Ducale–St. Mark's Basilica complex with less prestigious, and yet unequivocally modern, features of the city, such as the steamboats of the public transport system (fig. 4.59).<sup>105</sup> The bold use of colours, simplification of forms, and dynamic foreshortened perspective, as if viewed from an airplane, reveal Rosso's awareness of futurist experimentation in advertising, and anticipate the early 1930s graphic design of artists such as Attilio Calzavara (1901–1952).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte, le Biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928–1942)*, (Udine: Forum, 2006), p. 95.

<sup>106</sup> See his illustrations for *Opere Pubbliche* (1932). Enrica Torelli Landini, *Attilio Calzavara*, (Fiesole: Amalthea, 1994), pp. 137–155.

Thanks to his remarkable ability to adapt his designs to different techniques – textiles (mainly lacework, but also carpets and tapestries), furniture, stained-glass, wallpaper, and posters – Rosso played a significant role in the development of Italian applied arts between 1927 and 1935. His designs reflect and react to the debates and problems that characterised the interwar period. He tried to heal the separation between designer and artisan by committing to the study of technique, and his lacework drawings reveal an awareness of the formal potential of the craft. His compositions for textiles and furniture show inventiveness, a great variety of forms, and a willingness to experiment; they push the boundaries of the reinterpretation of traditional repertoires, introducing new images and an irreverent, humorous spirit. Because of his fame as a moderniser, Rosso managed to extend his contacts beyond the limits of Rome, establishing durable links in Venice, and above all Milan. This allowed him to bridge the tendencies developed in two of the country's main centres of artistic creativity. After an initial phase, when he gravitated in the orbit of Gio Ponti's neoclassic group, he entered a new one, where, thanks to an intense collaboration, he helped to define a recognizable ornamental language to characterise the ENAPI production.

Rosso's engagement with applied arts design began to falter only when a more intense programme of state intervention in the arts caused a fundamental shift. Alongside the traditional private space for the applied arts, a public dimension emerged, which needed to define itself and its goals through the form of the objects. Rosso responded by focusing on techniques that had a traditional relationship with architecture. However, his approach remained the same: the traditional repertoire was a point of departure; the function and destination (when known) were the elements used to come up with each design. The applied arts for Rosso were no different from a mural or mosaic: they were an integral part of his practice as a decorator. An ornament characterises the object as it does the space. The adorned object, like a mural or a wall painting, decorates the space. Objects, as spaces, were always designed by Rosso as expressions of unique circumstances; consequently, the form of each decoration was also unique. Even when Rosso was asked to lend his designs to objects made of cheaper materials or manufactured with less skill, they remained pieces that could never be mass produced. They were *objets d'art*, in the sense used by Le Corbusier (1887–1965) in his essay *Type-Needs: Type-Furniture* (1925). Here the *objet d'art* (both in its possible status as an authentic work of art and as 'dross') is contrasted with the 'human-limb object', the only

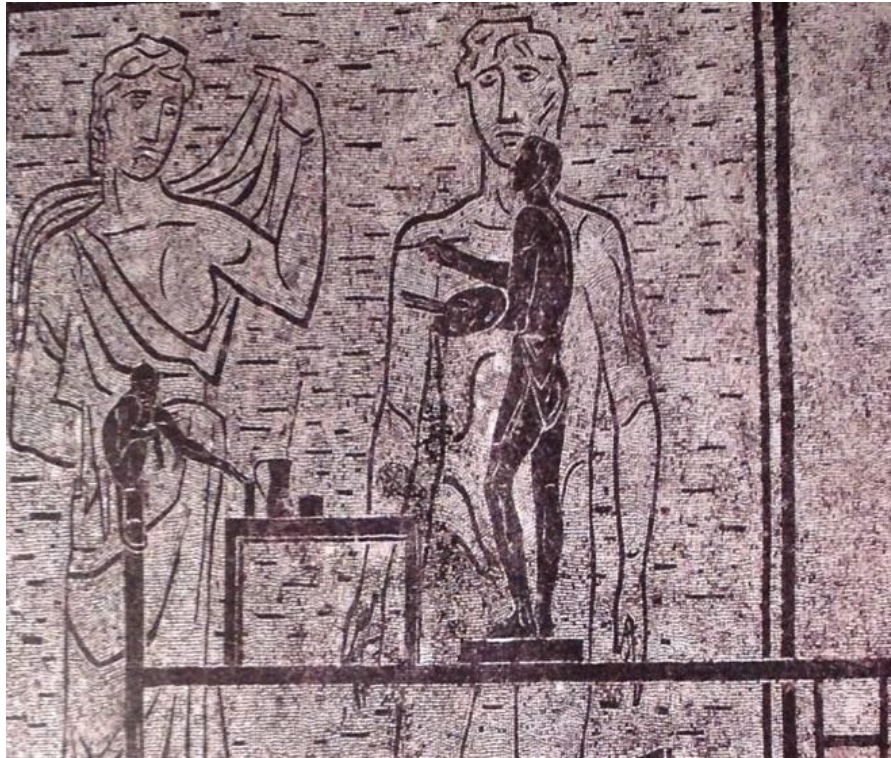
form which modern designers should be concerned.<sup>107</sup> Rosso never followed the example of others decorators, such as Marcello Nizzoli, in becoming an industrial designer. He remained faithful to the principles of his own practice. As a decorator, he accommodated himself to the dominant model by collaborating with artisans, as he had previously done with architects. In a context witnessing the first uncertain emergence of industrial design, Rosso's experience developed within the boundaries of the 'proto-design', the substantial formal and material renewal of the crafts, as defined by Anty Pansera. He created, nonetheless, an interesting and extremely revealing corpus.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Frank (2000), pp. 85–88.

<sup>108</sup> Anty Pansera, 'Protodesign', in Renato Barilli et al. (eds.), *Gli Anni Trenta. Arte e cultura in Italia*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1983), pp. 310–322.

## Part II. Spaces and decoration



Giulio Rosso, *Painting* (detail), mosaics, Foro Italico, Rome, 1937: the author, 2015.



## 5. Negotiating identities: the decoration of the spaces of *rappresentanza*

*'The house reflects the true and essential image of those who inhabit it; the house, as the style, declares the nature, the character, and the qualities of those who wished and wanted it to be designed as it is.'*<sup>1</sup>

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) considered ornament both an 'instrument of distinction/identification with respect to the community' and a form of 'social pleasure founded on vanity'.<sup>2</sup> In the realm of private spaces, decoration has always fulfilled a need to visually synthesise the public image and individual identity of a patron, owner, or inhabitant. As Penny Sparke has argued, 'within modernity the interior became a marker of people's changing identities, one of the only stable (if temporary) frameworks for the construction of the "self" and social status.'<sup>3</sup> It is thus a space for potential conflict, since the self is (by definition) individual, while social status, especially in Rosso's period, required membership in a specific community that was regulated by shared principles and conventions.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I investigate the schemes that Rosso designed for domestic spaces and private offices, analysing the mechanisms through which he expressed status, individuality, authority, and gender.

The domestic spaces examined in the first part of this chapter reveal the decorator's preoccupation with social prestige, as well as his interest in expressing individual personality. Carlo Tridenti (quoted above exhorting householders to take care of their houses) considered interior design to be the prerogative of a 'man or a woman of today, of a higher social status than average, and of not too banally bourgeois taste.'<sup>5</sup> The judgement of guests played a pivotal role, as it was in their power to validate the status of their hosts. Rosso's decorations mainly adorned spaces of reception, where he participated in the representative function of the domestic interior design. However, commissions were carried out by the decorator that encouraged meditations on the

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Tridenti, 'L'arredamento della casa moderna e l'artigianato', *Cellini*, 5 (1941), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Giuliana Altea, *Il Fantasma del decorativo*, (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2012), pp. 13, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> I am adopting a Weberian concept of status. According to Weber, 'status groups are normally communities, which are held together by notions of proper lifestyles and by the social esteem and honour accorded to them by others. [...] A status group can exist only to the extent that others accord its members prestige or degrading.' Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of sociological thought: ideas in historical and social context*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 228–230.

<sup>5</sup> Tridenti (1941), 18.



home as a space for introspection or ‘the scenario for personality experiments.’<sup>6</sup> In the second part of this chapter, I will focus on the ‘different, gendered value systems, which extended to the aesthetic languages used within’ designs for interiors.<sup>7</sup> The house will be considered as the locus for conflicting feminine and masculine forms of authority, introducing another aspect of the inter-war debate on decoration that is crucial for assessing Rosso’s designs for public spaces commissioned by the fascist regime (examined in Chapter 7): the extent to which decoration itself was considered as a gender-loaded practice.

Finally, I shall consider decorative schemes that represent the identity and power of financial or governmental bodies. In Italian, spaces in which ‘the codification of the furniture and décor serve as an aid to the construction of [...] social identities’,<sup>8</sup> such as atria, drawing rooms, and dining rooms, are called *di rappresentanza*. Helpfully, the Italian definition encompasses private atria, waiting and meeting rooms, and corporate and ministerial offices as well, highlighting the private dimension of these spaces and their function as self-representative signals. The audience presupposed by these spaces consisted of peers or professional members of the financial elite (engaged in business missions), rather than potential consumers or citizens requiring indoctrination. The decoration of spaces *di rappresentanza* was primarily a means of self-assertion and reciprocal recognition, rather than a commercial or ideological form of visual promotion (examined in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively).<sup>9</sup> At the end of the chapter, I will analyse the scheme that Rosso designed for his own house. Here, for once, there was no need to negotiate with patrons, architects, or the rules of his practice, and Rosso could allow his own, undiluted form of domestic decoration to finally emerge.

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<sup>6</sup> Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska, ‘Location Envy’, in David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There, Elsewhere*, (London: Open Editions, 2002), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Susie McKellar and Penny Sparke (eds.), *Interior Design and Identity*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Sparke (2008), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> I am assuming a close connection between the aesthetic and sociological dimensions, as postulated by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, first edn Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, trans. Richard Nice). According to Bourdieu, our aesthetic tastes are largely dependent on our social position (or the one we aspire to). At the same time, I consider ostentatious wealth a way of signalling status to others, as discussed by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1899).

### 5.1 Tradition and innovation in Rosso's schemes for private households

As Eugenio Giovannetti cheekily observed, after the success of his early schemes, Rosso became a fashionable decorator: 'ladies fight for his services, when there is a wall, a piece of cloth or furniture to be decorated.'<sup>10</sup> He responded to their desire for modern living rooms and parlours with his entries for the *Pensionato Artistico Nazionale* competition in 1927 (figs. 5.1–5.4).<sup>11</sup> On that occasion, Rosso was asked to create a decorative scheme involving frescos, stuccowork, and sgraffiti for the interiors of a countryside villa. His designs confirmed the decorator's adherence to the playful neo-classicism of Gio Ponti, Emilio Lancia, and Tomaso Buzzi. Echoing Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), the work of French neo-classicists, and their early nineteenth century Milanese followers, these schemes aimed to provide 'a lesson in health and balance, [...] perfect mirror [...] of the bourgeois soul, positive and practical, but not alien to the fantasy, the dream; conciliating these two aspects with a fine sense of proportion and measurement that was an absolute delight.'<sup>12</sup> Such values certainly resonated with Ponti's wealthy private clientele. Rosso's designs presented the same geometrical compartmentation on the ceilings and trompe l'oeil architectural elements that the Milanese architects were using in their refined revival of the classical, as evident in the façade of Ponti's Villa in via Randaccio (Milan, 1926), his Villa *L'Ange Volant* interiors (Garches, 1926), and the designs he created with Buzzi for an Italian embassy (1928) (figs. 5.5–5.7). Ponti, who was a member of the *Pensionato* panel, loved Rosso's work, noting the 'prudent and mischievous delight with which Rosso has served his fictive patrons, who were enthusiastic'<sup>13</sup> Rosso's elegant manner, infused with references to the past and to stylised modern forms was successful, and he developed many schemes in this vein during the following years. In 1930, when he was asked to decorate a room in the 'Decorators' Gallery' of the fourth Triennial Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts

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<sup>10</sup> Eugenio Giovannetti, 'Il pittore dell'allegria', *Il Piccolo*, 20/04/1927, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> The *Pensionato* was a bursary awarded every year to a young painter, sculptor, architect, and decorator. The winners received a studio in Rome, a stipend, and a chance to study at the Academy of Fine Arts for the next three years. Rosso had already applied in 1926, when none of the bursaries were awarded. The awarding panel included Chini, the architects Piacentini and Ponti, and the sculptor Libero Andreotti (1875–1933).

<sup>12</sup> Mario Praz, *La Filosofia dell'arredamento*, (Rome: Documento, 1945), pp. 102–103.

<sup>13</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Giulio Rosso Pensionato', *Domus*, 11 (1928), 22.

of Monza, his first proposal, published in *Domus* two months before the opening, was in the same style (fig. 5.8).<sup>14</sup>

However, the scheme that Rosso actually depicted was completely different, suggesting that he had second thoughts about the modern domestic interior (fig. 5.9). The thin geometrical partitions disappeared, along with the composition's symmetrical structure. Instead, Rosso represented strange objects, organic forms, geometrical figures, foreshortened architectural structures, shadows, and profiles against a coloured backdrop and the rhythm of vertical bands in different tones. He evoked landscapes, using natural and architectural forms, which nonetheless seemed hollow and insubstantial. Strange constructions populated by odd objects with no apparent function elusively interacted with the furniture. Three small horses at the centre of each wall gave the room its name: *Sala dei Cavallini* (room of the small horses). Although the name recalls the *Sala dei Cavalli* in Palazzo Te (1526–28, Mantua) – where Giulio Romano (ca. 1499–1546) and his pupils had depicted Federico Gonzaga's favourite horses against a trompe l'oeil architectural backdrop – Rosso's scheme was completely different in character. Engaging with all of the room's available surfaces, the decorator blurred the conventional distinction between wall and ceiling. By allowing forms to spread without interruption, he invited the observer into an immersive and mesmerising experience in a space made ambiguous and fragmentary by his uncanny imagery. The subtle variation of the background tones, as well as his representation of flat and three-dimensional forms, confirmed and challenged the flatness of the wall. Similarly, foreshortened objects appeared to project out of the surface, or to recede into a fictitious dimension beyond it. Traditional genres of interior decoration, as well as the distinction and hierarchy between wall and ceiling, decoration and architecture were all questioned.

The novelty of Rosso's scheme can be appreciated by comparing it with those of other decorators in the Gallery. Raffaele de Grada (1885–1957), in his *Sala del Paesaggio Italiano* (Room of the Italian Landscape), imagined a dining room opening onto a calm seascape, visible through trompe l'oeil windows (fig. 5.10). The scheme of Alberto Bevilacqua (1896–1979) featured square mosaic panels representing portraits of

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<sup>14</sup> Gio Ponti, 'La vicina IV esposizione internazionale d'arte decorativa alla Villa Reale di Monza', *Domus*, 3 (1930), 10–11. Decorators were commissioned to design mural decorations, furniture, and applied artworks, in order to demonstrate their ability to set up coherent and satisfying ensembles.

athletes (fig. 5.11). Decoration, in these schemes, was always clearly delimited – defined in relation to conventional genres, such as the landscape or the gallery of portraits. Rosso, responding to the experimental context offered by the Triennale, looked for alternative sources of inspiration. The surreal character of his scheme makes one wonder whether he had seen Alberto Savinio's paintings exhibited in Milan in January 1930 (fig. 5.12).<sup>15</sup> If so, Rosso might have been influenced by Savinio's interest in the mysteriously evocative power of common objects, forms, and vegetation when detached from their usual context and displaced, magnified, distorted, or associated with other (apparently unrelated) objects. Rosso's contemporary cover for Roberto Papini's book *Le Arti d'Oggi* confirms his fascination with the puzzling compositions of Metaphysical art (fig. 5.13).<sup>16</sup> In the Decorators' Gallery, taking advantage of the absence of a specific patron, Rosso created an intimate '*chambre mentale*', for individual contemplation rather than public ostentation.<sup>17</sup>

His efforts divided the critics. Some objected to the extreme refinement of the scheme and thought the room looked empty or monotonous. Aldo Carpi (1886–1973) emphasised the quirky side of Rosso's work, commenting that 'it seemed impossible to live in the *Sala dei Cavallini*.'<sup>18</sup> At the same time, influential figures, such as Ugo Ojetti and Margherita Sarfatti, praised it, highlighting the value of Rosso's 'quiet and durable decoration for interiors of private dwellings.'<sup>19</sup> Sarfatti's comment is particularly interesting: she described him as 'the most cheerfully ingenious, the most sober, subtle and harmonious interior decorator of truly modern homes, i.e. generally small and unpretentious.'<sup>20</sup> This reference to homes of limited size and unassuming character, associated with the concept of the 'modern house', suggests that Sarfatti did not consider Rosso's Triennale scheme suitable for a traditional stately home. The usual markers of social status, such as the landscape and architectural capriccio, had been reinterpreted in such a way as to be barely recognisable. By challenging the conventions of order, theme, and character in decoration, Rosso made his art accessible to a wider

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<sup>15</sup> Pia Vivarelli, *Alberto Savinio. Catalogo Generale*, (Milan: Electa, 1996), p. 428.

<sup>16</sup> Roberto Papini, *Le Arti d'Oggi*, (Rome: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1930).

<sup>17</sup> Claire A. P. Willson, *Mural Painting in Britain 1840–1940*, (Oxford: University Press, 2000), p. 302.

<sup>18</sup> Aldo Carpi, 'Alla IV esposizione d'arte decorativa di Monza', *Rassegna dell'Istruzione Artistica*, (1930), 214; Michele Biancale, 'La IV Mostra di Arti Decorative a Monza', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 11/05/1930, p. 3; Piero Scarpa, 'La IV Mostra Internazionale di Arte Decorativa', *Il Messaggero*, 11/05/1930, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ugo Ojetti, 'L'Esposizione di Arte Decorative a Monza', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 11/05/1930, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, 'Arte ed Industrie Oggi a Monza', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 11/05/1930, p. 3.

range of potential clients. In fact, the houses that he went on to decorate were neither small nor unpretentious; he always worked for a wealthy and affluent clientele, the 'new princes – those powerful men of finance and industry in the post-World War I years' as Vittorio Viganò has described Ponti's patrons.<sup>21</sup>

In one case, however, Rosso worked for a group that would usually have been excluded from the privilege of artistic patronage. The decorative frieze he designed for the exterior of a council estate run by the Istituto per le Case Popolari of Rome (the Office for Social Housing) represents an interesting case of decoration used to express the identity of a subaltern group.<sup>22</sup> In the view of the period, these houses 'had no elements of *rappresentanza*', since there was no need for 'establishing through décor the relationship between family and society' as in the bourgeoisie house.<sup>23</sup> In late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century housing estates, ornament was reserved for exteriors, projected onto the buildings' communal space and often expressing a patronising and stereotypical view of the entire class. Rosso's scheme also decorated an external, communal space, reducing, once again, the inhabitants of the estate to passive consumers of artistic intervention. Yet, his designs represented a departure from both the usual naturalistic and impersonal themes used on buildings of this sort, and the genres traditionally associated with the houses of the wealthy. By combining humble working tools with objects of leisure in a sort of modern hieroglyphic (a gramophone, a tennis racket, toys, a guitar, a brush etc.), Rosso succeeded in evoking concepts of domesticity, playfulness, tenderness, and protection, without creating a design that was treacly or excessively naïve (fig. 5.14).

To provide his affluent patrons with 'suitably lofty expressions of their aspirations or ideals', Rosso drew on traditional motifs and solutions drawn from 15th–17th century Italian palaces and villas.<sup>24</sup> The decorative landscapes, quadrature, and references to mythical heroes and allegories were updated and reinterpreted to suit the houses of the

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<sup>21</sup> Vittorio Viganò, 'The Art of Ponti', in Ugo La Pietra (ed.), *Gio Ponti*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), unpaginated.

<sup>22</sup> Felice, Carlo A., 'Pitture e ambienti di Giulio Rosso', *Domus*, 10 (1931), 47, 87. The building is on the corner between piazza Sempione and via Subiaco; the frieze has disappeared. I am using Antonio Gramsci's definition (in *Quaderno 3*) for the term 'subaltern': a person or group of people in a particular society, who is/are excluded from participating in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. See Guido Liguori, "'Classi subalterne" marginali e "classi subalterne" fondamentali in Gramsci', *Critica marxista*, 4 (2015), 48.

<sup>23</sup> Giuseppe Samonà, *La Casa Popolare*, first edn Napoli: EPSA, 1935, (Padova: Marsilio, 1972), p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> Willsdon (2000), p. 315.

contemporary dominant class. Personal aspirations mingled with ostentatious displays of social status; belonging to a group could be as important as subtly distinguishing oneself from it. Depending on the nature of each commission, Rosso's appropriative approach could evoke a sense of nostalgia, indulge a taste for the fantastic and grotesque, or even take a humorous and playful stance towards tradition. As Chapter 3 highlighted, invention, fantasy, and humour were elements that Rosso's design practice shared with that of Gio Ponti. The geometric compartmentations proliferating on the walls and ceilings of Casa Botti (1930) (figs. 5.15, 5.16), and in the atrium and parlour of the Convitto Civico in Varese (1930) (fig. 5.17), confirm this influence (fig. 5.18).<sup>25</sup> At the same time, these examples reveal that Rosso looked at a number of other references. In the atrium with a fountain (by Venini) in Casa Botti, Rosso revived the tradition of Pompeian decoration and grotesques, while the geometric partitions at Varese were filled with motifs borrowed from the Hungarian designer Lajos Kozma, whose influence can always be detected in Rosso's productions from this period (fig. 5.19).

Paradoxically, Rosso's only collaboration with Ponti and Buzzi, in the Villa Vittoria in Florence (1931–1934), marked the moment when they began to pursue different paths. By choosing Buzzi, Ponti, and Rosso, Count Alessandro and Vittoria Contini Bonacossi made clear that Milanese neoclassicism was the style that most closely reflected their own taste and, above all, considered apt to convey their status. The original drawings by Buzzi and Ponti, held in the Wolfsonian Institute of Miami, and photographs in Rosso's archive in Sao Paulo, allow a reconstruction of their respective contributions.<sup>26</sup> Ponti was responsible for a drawing room and the gallery, where the art collection was displayed. Buzzi designed the count's private apartment and guest bedroom. Rosso was responsible for an apartment belonging to the count's nephew, three bathrooms, a dining room, the bar, and a basement entertainment room.<sup>27</sup> Ponti complied with the expectations of his patrons by drawing on the Classical imagery he favoured: his furniture explicitly referenced Roman examples, even to the point of engraving Latin inscriptions on pieces of furniture in the gallery.

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<sup>25</sup> Agnoldomenico Pica, 'Fontane d'appartamento', *Casabella*, 28 (1930), 30; 'Edifici dell'architetto Morpurgo in Varese', *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 5–6 (1930), 236–250; 'Giulio Rosso, cartone per la decorazione di un soffitto in casa R. in Milano', *Domus*, 8 (1929), 27.

<sup>26</sup> Enrico Colle and Alessandro Lazzeri, *Villa Vittoria*, (Florence: Centro Congressi, 1995), p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Carlo Sisi (ed.), *Motivi e figure nell'arte Toscana del XX secolo*, (Florence: Banca Toscana, 2000), p. 152.

In comparison with Ponti's ironic revival, Rosso and Buzzi's designs for the spaces of *rappresentanza* are conventionally dull (fig. 5.20). More personal were Rosso's solutions for the bathrooms. Here, playing with the theme of the Roman bath, he covered the floors with mosaics of coloured, square tesserae, composing extremely stylised representations of flowers and plants, similar to those he was using in lacework designs of the same period (fig. 5.21). Lajos Kozma had created similar mosaics in the hall of a private house in Hungary (fig. 5.22), as had Ponti and Buzzi at Casa Borletti (1928) in Milan (fig. 5.23).<sup>28</sup> However, Classical and neo-Renaissance references prevailed: in one of the patron's own bathrooms, a rather modern floor scheme was counter-balanced by a traditional design on the bathtub wall. Using the extremely precious Florentine technique of *commesso* (marquetry), Rosso created a trompe-l'œil *serliana* window, overlooking a formal Italian garden with fountains and a classical temple in the background (fig. 5.24).

If, in the Villa Vittoria, Rosso had to match the aspirations of a patron who considered himself a new Renaissance Maecenas, by virtue of his formidable private collection of antique and modern art, the commissions he received from entrepreneurial members of the Milanese bourgeoisie favoured a more challenging engagement with the repertoire. For the luxury flat of Camillo Ricordi in Milan (architect: Melchiorre Bega, July–October 1938), Rosso was asked to provide two floor mosaics 'of the genre of those [he had] designed for Tripoli', thus, as it will be discussed in Chapter 6, engaging more or less overtly with the antique and exotic.<sup>29</sup> The Ricordi mosaics demonstrate how Rosso considered very attentively the space in the design process. In the largest, Rosso arranged figurative decorative motifs in rectangular sections along the external border, leaving the central area (where the furniture would be placed) free from figurations (fig. 5.25). The motifs, in red tesserae against a pale-yellow background, developed an Arcadian and escapist theme, suitable for a secluded section of the living room in which hosts and guests would relax in front of the large chimney. Plants, animals (an ostrich, gazelles, and a dog with a bird), and two women carrying containers on their heads

<sup>28</sup> Judith Koós, *Kozma Lajos munkássága*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975), p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> The mosaics for the hotel Uaddan in Tripoli are examined in Chapter 6. ASSM, b. 71, n. 139, 'Pavimenti Ricordi Milano'. I visited the property in February 2014: although the large mosaic was still in situ, there was no visible trace of either Rosso's smaller floor mosaic or the one he designed for the wall near the bar. The latter is visible in 'Alcuni arredamenti di Melchiorre Bega', *Domus*, 169 (1941), 25. There is a reference to it in a letter from Salviati to Camillo Ricordi, 03/09/1938, in Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Fondo Salviati, b. 801, n. 743, fasc. 27.

formed an exotic setting for the main figures, which mirrored each other across short sections of wall, and were distinguished by their larger proportions: a young man and woman lying, half-naked, in a natural landscape (figs. 5.26, 5.27). The mosaic evidently aimed to transcend the urban dimensions of the flat by evoking a natural idyll, typical of a suburban villa.

In the adjacent smaller space, which functioned as a covered veranda mediating between the living room and a large panoramic terrace, Rosso opted for red and green tesserae on the same yellow background. The mosaic featured a grid of 36 rectangles filled with various stylised motifs of plants, animals, convivial objects, and masks arranged without privileging a fixed point of view (fig. 5.28). Here, Rosso reinterpreted the genre of the Roman *xenia*, in which geometrically framed still lifes represented the owner's gifts to his guests: animals, alive and dead, food and drinks, masks and games, and genre scenes. The *xenia* were generally displayed in *rappresentanza* spaces around the peristyle, facing the villa's internal garden. They were thus linked with 'spaces dedicated to the relationship between the family and the exterior; spaces in which the communication of the household cultural, social and economic status was paramount.'<sup>30</sup> Rosso, who might have seen examples in the Tripoli archaeological museum (the mosaic of Orpheus, second century A.D.), as well as in Rome, revived the genre for the liminal area between the interiors of the flat and its open-air terrace. Themes of wealth and generosity resonated with the exclusive and cultured guests of the Ricordi family, while the insertion of unconventional motifs such as feminine hands (a quintessentially Pontian theme), geometrical and abstract patterns (perhaps borrowed from Libyan textiles), and a highly stylised and vivid representation of female masks attested to the householder's modern taste.

Another genre that Rosso used recurrently in interior decoration designs throughout the 1930s was the decorative landscape, or *paysage décoratif*. This genre of architectural decoration had a long tradition: Vitruvius (born ca. 80–70 BC, died after ca. 15 BC) and Pliny the Elder (ca. AD 23–79) described it as a common solution used in interior decoration.<sup>31</sup> Starting in the sixteenth century, Italian and Dutch artists revisited that

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<sup>30</sup> Sara Redaelli, 'Rappresentazioni di *xenia* nei mosaici romani dei principali centri della Byzacena', in Paola Ruggeri (ed.), *L'Africa Romana – Atti del XX Congresso*, (Rome: Carocci, 2015), p. 2554.

<sup>31</sup> Monica Salvadori, 'Amenissima Parietum Picturam. La Fortuna del Paesaggio nella Pittura Parietale Romana', *Eidola*, 5 (2008), 25–26.



tradition, adorning the houses and villas of the powerful with images of properties they owned, ideal landscapes populated by mythological characters, and/or genre scenes. Scholars of Rosso's time considered the Dutch, in particular, to have been responsible for introducing genre scenes, together with a bizarre form of landscape that framed 'merry profane tales and hedonistic visions.'<sup>32</sup> Rosso engaged with several different typologies of decorative landscape, adapting his approach to reflect the aspirations of his patrons.

A design published in *Domus* (1931) confirms Rosso's interest in the potentially bizarre and capricious effects associated with strange architectural elements, either violently foreshortened, or impossibly elevated in the landscape (fig. 5.29).<sup>33</sup> In the drawing room of the house of the architect Marcello Canino (1895–1970) in Rome, Rosso reinterpreted the Renaissance iconography of the *Città Ideale*, by creating two urban landscapes populated by a handful of nineteenth century characters (figs. 5.30, 5.31). The neoclassical buildings, fantastically elongated, as in medieval altarpieces, framed two public spaces with fountains, gardens, and mazes, whose receding lines converged at vanishing points placed at the thresholds of strange, toy-like, towering constructions. These images made reference to the profession of their patron by playfully reworking an illustrious Renaissance precedent, while emphasising, with a modern twist, the already metaphysical and surreal atmosphere of the reference.

The degree of inventiveness that Rosso could bring to a project also depended on the location of the space to be decorated, and its degree of representativeness. This is clearly revealed in the flat of Giacomo Molle in Rome (1932), for which Rosso designed murals for the dining room and a passage connecting the living room to the bedrooms.<sup>34</sup> In the dining room, two large landscapes faced each other; they featured convivial scenes set in the countryside and at the seaside, harbour scenes with vessels, and cityscapes (figs. 5.32, 5.33). In these cases, Rosso's interest in modernising the genre is evident in his mixture of references to the antique and contemporary; a group of people

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<sup>32</sup> Rezio Buscaroli, *La Pittura di Paesaggio in Italia*, (Bologna: Mareggiani, 1935), pp. 57, 8.

<sup>33</sup> 'Due bar per appartamento', *Domus*, 12 (1931), 85.

<sup>34</sup> Alfio Susini, 'Appartamento signorile in Roma', *Architettura*, 6 (1935), 348–355. Architect Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo coordinated the interventions. The interiors have been kept intact; see Maria Paola Maino, 'Casa Molle e lo "scimmiotto azzurro"', *Forme Moderne*, 2 (2009), 12–39. Morpurgo, a largely forgotten figure, collaborated closely with Marcello Piacentini and followed his colleague both in adopting a typical stripped-back style of monumental classicism, and in relying on a trusted team of artists to complete his projects.

dressed in togas balances a party of men in modern clothes, happily drinking, playing games, and chatting. Similarly, old-fashioned sailing boats are paired with airplanes crossing the sky, while the fantastic architecture emerging from the background, drawing on the early seventeenth-century genre of *capriccio*, uses the vocabulary of international modernism: *pilotis*, cantilevered structures, geometric profiles, and flat roofs. In the hallway, Rosso represented another architectural capriccio, this time composed of buildings featuring classical elements, though rendered in a vivid red and green outline (fig. 5.34). Traditional architectural forms have been emptied out and reduced to graphic diagrams, whose acute, chromatic contrast increases their visionary appearance.

Rosso's *capricci* retained all of the characteristics traditionally attributed to the genre: its fantastic character, unconventional chromatic approach, and bizarre transfigurations, achieved through dramatic foreshortening.<sup>35</sup> In addition, by letting the scenes emerge from an indistinct background, Rosso actively involved the wall in his decoration: its surface was repurposed as a field of apparitions. These imagined landscapes offered an opportunity to interweave references to an individual and personal story with the social significance embedded in the genre. Possible references to the owner's identity, such as, for example, the fact that he came from Oneglia, a port town in Liguria, near the Albenga airport, were projected into an anachronistic time, a permanent history with no discontinuity.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, there is an evident distinction in the approach used to decorate these two very different spaces. The dining room murals retain a traditional flavour, revealing unconventional details only at close inspection. The capriccio along the hallway, a space that leads into the private part of the house, has a much more original and surreal character. The Molle murals were designed to address multi-layered preoccupations. Status was expressed through the traditional genre of the decorative landscape; anxieties related to the need to 'appear modern' were conveyed through references to contemporary architecture. Finally, Rosso addressed the pressing question of the relationship between decoration and

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<sup>35</sup> Buscaroli (1935), p. 315.

<sup>36</sup> Juan José Lahuerta, 'Architettura Moderna e Pittura Murale: una relazione paradossale', *Casabella*, 1 (2012), 115. Molle was very attached to his native land: later in his life, he collected and published the ancient statutes of Oneglia: *Oneglia nella sua storia*, (Milan: Giuffrè, 1972).

architecture by actively involving the latter in a design that aspired to evoke, rather than impose, a narrative.

Another case in which Rosso used a decorative landscape to stage references that resonated with the owner's identity, while evoking a relationship with a specific territory, was his scheme for villa *La Loggetta* in Naples.<sup>37</sup> The building was designed by the architect Marcello Canino in 1934 for Giuseppe Cenzato (1882–1969), 'one of the most influential men in Naples, not only in the financial field, but also in the cultural and social ones.'<sup>38</sup> Murals decorated the dining (fig. 5.35), living, and music rooms. The third, in particular, played a special role among the *rappresentanza* spaces in Cenzato's villa because it was often used for evening concerts, at which he played the cello.<sup>39</sup> Frescos represented scenes inspired by the *Odyssey* and the myth of the mermaid Parthenope (fig. 5.36). This classical and mythological repertoire resonated with the style of the architecture: Canino had designed the house as a modern reinterpretation of a Roman suburban villa. In his decoration, Rosso also referenced a long-established tradition in which the feats of mythological heroes were used to associate a patron with specific values and virtues – in this case Ulysses' ingenuity, bravery, and spirit of adventure.<sup>40</sup> The legend of Parthenope offered a further reading. According to the story, after being rejected by Ulysses, the mermaid committed suicide and her corpse was washed ashore on the coast of Campania, becoming part of the land on which Naples was later founded. The natural and artificial elements of the decorative landscape constituted a *mise-en-scène* that simultaneously functioned as a learned evocation of the past, a way of expressing the identity of the patron by identifying him with heroic traits, and an assertion of the patron's belonging to and control over a specific territory, the Gulf of Naples. It also reinforced a relationship with the physical territory already inherent in the architecture; the gulf and city could be admired through the windows of the house,

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<sup>37</sup> Marcello Piacentini, 'Villa "La Loggetta" in Napoli', *Architettura*, 2 (1937), 57–64.

<sup>38</sup> Cenzato, an engineer from Lonigo (Vicenza), was, from 1928, the general manager of the Società Meridionale Elettrica (SME), the most important power company in southern Italy. See Michele Fatica, 'Giuseppe Cenzato', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 23 (1979), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-cenzato\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-cenzato_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) [accessed 29/03/16].

<sup>39</sup> Pasquale Belfiore, 'L'architettura di Canino, il maestro ritrovato', *La Repubblica*, 06/08/2005, [http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2005/06/08/architettura-di-canino-il-maestro-ritrovato.html?refresh\\_ce](http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2005/06/08/architettura-di-canino-il-maestro-ritrovato.html?refresh_ce), [accessed 10/03/16].

<sup>40</sup> Anne Dunlop, *Painted Palaces. The rise of secular art in early renaissance Italy*, (Louisville: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2009), p. 208.

creating an immediate visual connection between past and present, the owner of the house and the vast territory at his feet.

## 5.2 The place of women and the place of men; the gender of interior decoration

At the end of her book, *La casa bella per tutti* (1932), Amina Polito Fantini reminded her readers that 'the landlady is the nicest and most welcoming ornament of them all, the only one able to make her house really pleasant.'<sup>41</sup> In 1928, Rosso seems to anticipate visually Fantini's recommendation, with his cover design for the magazine *Emporium* (fig. 5.37). It represents a woman lying on a chaise longue, taking a moment of dreamy rest from reading a book that she holds in her right hand. In the background, one of Rosso's architectural capriccios forms a protective and enclosed space in which she is comfortably secluded (although perhaps dreaming of escape); this figure embodies the aesthetic and performative role into which women of the 'leisure class' were forced, according to Thorstein Veblen.<sup>42</sup> Their duties included the extremely important task of 'receiving the guests', when the private sphere of the house became public and open to scrutiny; the respectability of the entire household depended on their ability to perform this delicate social ritual. It was not by chance that, when Rosso was asked to decorate such dwellings, he often placed female allegories in the entrance halls, visualising the welcoming and protective role of the mistress of the house.

Rosso's mosaic panel in the atrium of Melchiorre Bega's own villa all'Osservanza, on the homonymous hill overlooking Bologna, provides a good example. A modern reimagining of the ancient floor with *emblema* genre, it represents a female figure, sitting on a bench on the threshold of an open door (figs. 5.38–5.39).<sup>43</sup> The figure holds a branch with a pomegranate in her right hand, while pointing at the door with her left; she is surrounded by objects that allude to conviviality and serenity, constituting an allegory of hospitality. Its iconography recalls a similar figure designed by Ponti in 1928 for a Richard-Ginori vase (fig. 5.40). Rosso borrowed from this piece the concept of associating the gentle gesture of holding a flower with images of the refreshments

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<sup>41</sup> Amina Polito Fantini, *La casa bella per tutti*, (Milan: Solmi, 1932), p. 210.

<sup>42</sup> Donald J. Bush, 'Thorstein Veblen's Economic Aesthetic', *Leonardo*, 4 (1978), 282.

<sup>43</sup> Archivio Melchiorre Bega (AMB), Photographs, 'Villa all'Osservanza'. In Hellenistic or Roman mosaic floors, an *emblema* is a central panel representing figures. Rosso had already designed a small wall panel representing a *Serenade* for Bega's house in via Galliera, Bologna. Melchiorre Bega, 'Bega pro domo sua', *Domus*, 53 (1932), 275.

offered to guests. There are also similarities with Rosso's scheme for the atrium of Casa Valsecchi in Milan, designed by Bega before 1933 (fig. 5.41).<sup>44</sup> On a concave wall that forms a flat niche, Rosso depicted a large female figure, standing against an aerial view of an island landscape. In place of a flower, this woman holds an architectural stone model of a crenelated gate with open doors: a reference to the openness of Valsecchi's house, a protected sanctuary of private life. The figure's monumental appearance confirms her status as a protective deity. The reference is clear and significant: by using a female figure holding a model of the house, Rosso evoked the canonical representation of titular and/or patron saints in the churches dedicated to them; typically, they held a model of the church or the town in their hands.

What about men? Was masculinity defined only indirectly, through the relationship of control that framed women as welcoming and protective figures? An opportunity to analyse a masculine-gendered domestic interior is provided by Rosso's scheme for the bar/fumoir of Casa Marcotulli, in Rome (fig. 5.42).<sup>45</sup> This was also an enclosed space. It gave the owner a place to relax alone and hold private conversations with male guests. Under a ceiling that featured geometric partitions framing plants, flowers, and stars, Rosso used the walls to represent natural landscapes, whose details – a lighthouse, an island with a harbour, a beach with a boat and tent – evoked faraway settings and the lure of adventurous escapism. As Ponti observed, the bar 'even in the home or in the club, had to suggest something exotic and exceptional.'<sup>46</sup> Rosso complied with this advice: he invited the male observers to identify with a sailor and a cowboy taming a horse, projecting them into an adventurous and potentially dangerous wilderness, while sitting comfortably on their sofas.

The decorative scheme for Marcello Piacentini's 'villa Quota 110', designed and built by the architect for his own family in 1930–32, is a compelling example of the strategies followed by Rosso in addressing requirements for personalising a space while defining the identity, roles, and authority of its owners.<sup>47</sup> A photograph in Piacentini's archive in

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<sup>44</sup> 'Carattere di arredamenti d'oggi', *Domus*, 61 (1933), 29.

<sup>45</sup> The house (16, via Aquileia) was sold when the family moved to Libya with architect Florestano di Fausto (Amedeo Marcotulli's brother-in-law). Back in Rome, they moved to 41, via Caroncini, where di Fausto commissioned Rosso to decorate an atrium. Leonetta Marcotulli, 'Informazioni', email to Antonio David Fiore (29/10/2012).

<sup>46</sup> 'Il bar di Soccorsa', *Domus*, 2 (1929), 21–22.

<sup>47</sup> Roberto Dulio, *Marcello Piacentini e la villa 'Quota 110'*, communication 10/12/2015, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome.

Florence shows that Rosso's fresco *Architecture* decorated a wall along the corridor that encircled the internal yard, which was surrounded by the family's private quarters (figs. 5.43, 5.44).<sup>48</sup> A second fresco, *Painting*, was captioned in *Domus* in 1934 as 'decorating the house of the *Accademico Piacentini*' (fig. 5.45).<sup>49</sup> *Architecture* and *Painting* had the same proportions and similar compositions. I believe that, designed as pendants, they decorated opposite sides of the door between the private and public sections of the house. In addition, they introduced the two studios of Piacentini and his wife, the painter Matilde Festa, at opposite ends of the corridor. The fact that the allegories represented a woman and a man, rather than two women, as the iconographical tradition prescribed, confirms that this scheme had a personal reference, associating Piacentini and Festa with the arts they practiced. They presided over the two areas of the house dedicated to individual retreat, creative space, and solitary intellectual effort.

The harshness that characterises the modelling and postures of the figures, the violence of the chiaroscuro of their folded cloth garments, and the ambiguity of the settings, with their strange proportions and scale demonstrates Rosso's interest in the works of the artists of the *Scuola Romana*.<sup>50</sup> His use of this language will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7; here, I want to focus on Rosso's interpretation of the allegories, as I believe that they allow meanings to emerge related to the individual personalities of the couple and the balance of power between them. In *Painting*, the background could be interpreted as a landscape populated by surreal apparitions, or as a mural decoration on which the painter is still at work.<sup>51</sup> In this case, the cloth, suspended as if worn by an invisible presence in the background, could be considered an unfinished figure. The portrait sketched on a piece of paper lying on the floor might be a preparatory drawing of a woman's face (perhaps a reference to the couple's only daughter, Sofia). The mannequin, gigantically looming behind the allegorical figure, is a powerful symbolic presence, as famously exploited by Giorgio De Chirico during the *Pittura Metafisica*

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<sup>48</sup> AFAUF, Fondo Piacentini, b. 70 'via della Camilluccia'; AMB, press clippings, Melchiorre Bega, 'La decorazione murale della casa', 74–75.

<sup>49</sup> 'Evoluzione della decorazione', *Domus*, 79 (1934), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco (ed.), *Scuola Romana*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1988), pp. 125–126. The artists defined as belonging to this group did not follow a definite programme; rather, they personally interpreted the chromatic expressionism of Scipione Bonichi (1904–1933), Mario Mafai (1902–1965), and Antonietta Raphaël (1895–1975), developing a realist approach during the second half of the 1930s.

<sup>51</sup> Between 1929 and 1936, Festa was very active as a mural artist.

[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matilde-festa\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matilde-festa_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) [accessed 02/02/2017].

period (ca. 1914–1920). Mannequins were used to unmask the illusory nature of painting: they were considered the only possible inhabitants of the unreal and dreamlike settings conjured up by an artist's imagination.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, two joyous female figures are represented in the background of *Architecture*. This difference might hint at the metaphysical nature of painting, versus the practicality of architecture. In the dialectic between the two personifications, the architect is the bearer of authority: he is represented in profile, wearing a classical toga and holding the model of a building (given the urban backdrop, this may be a reference to Piacentini's interest in urban planning). At the same time, he is the designer, owner, and protector of the household. The two murals characterised the space strongly and unequivocally; so much so that a 1941 inventory of all the works of art kept in the villa (made prior to renting or selling it), does not mention them. It is likely that they were whitewashed to de-personalise the space.<sup>53</sup>

Rosso's schemes arose out of a negotiation between the need to design the most fitting form of ornament to represent his (male) patrons, and an understanding of spaces inhabited mostly by women. Inevitably, they conformed to the dynamics of control and dominion that regulated the relationship between men and women in contemporary Italian society. However, when particular commissions allowed for a different approach, Rosso seemed to seize the opportunity, and to challenge the traditional genres of interior decoration. In 1928, he was commissioned by the American heiress and socialite Gloria Bishop Gould (1906–1943), to decorate the dining room of her flat in Rome, one of the luxury apartments (16 to 20 rooms each) that formed the iconic Palazzina al Lungotevere Arnado da Brescia, designed by architect Giuseppe Capponi (1896–1936) in 1925. The only surviving photograph of the dining room suggests a treatment of the walls that anticipates the *Sala dei Cavallini* in Monza (fig. 5.46). The alternation of dark and light tones along vertical bands de-materialised the substance of the wall, turning it into a sort of curtain that ambiguously carried or concealed Rosso's 'shadows of figures', as described by Papini in *Domus*.<sup>54</sup> It is risky to attempt to draw firm conclusions without more reliable photographic evidence of the space. However, a copy of the booklet published by Pier Luigi Nervi's building company (Nervi & Nebbiosi) given by Capponi to

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<sup>52</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Storia di oggi e artisti di oggi', *Lo Stile*, 17 (1942), 3.

<sup>53</sup> These frescos do not exist anymore, as the walls on which they were made were destroyed during refurbishments carried out in the building. Communication, with photographs attached, from Roberto Dulio, 13/03/2015.

<sup>54</sup> Roberto Papini, 'Casa Gould in Roma', *Domus*, 12 (1929), 27.

Rosso (and now in his archive) had the following dedication: ‘to Rosso, so that you can begin thinking about the puppets!’<sup>55</sup> This humorous remark seems to suggest an unfulfilled expectation on the part of the architect: Rosso’s scheme notably did not feature any of the puppet-like figures that characterised his works during the 1920s. According to Papini, when Mrs Gould approached Capponi, she announced, ‘I am a woman of today, not of the fifteenth century; I want to live among lines of today and in the style of today!’<sup>56</sup> Whether or not these are Mrs Gould’s actual words, photographs of her apartment reveal evidence of an uncompromising modern taste.<sup>57</sup> Rosso must have regarded this as an ideal opportunity to experiment with an original kind of domestic decoration, free of references to traditional genres. This allowed him to assert a view of decoration that challenged the controlled and subdued status it was given by architects, which reproduced on a professional level the dynamics of power and subjugation that characterized the relationship between masculine and feminine as described above.

Indeed, as Altea has observed, modern architects considered decoration a fantastic and irrational practice, and therefore typically feminine, as opposed to their own quintessentially masculine activity, a rational expression of purely functional needs.<sup>58</sup> Such arguments, famously explained by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) in his *Ornament und Verbrechen*, relied on a long tradition.<sup>59</sup> As Mark Wigley has maintained, this view, which can be traced back to Greek commentators such as Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BC), was canonically established by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) in his treatises *De Re Aedificatoria* (1450 ca) and *De Familia* (1433–40).<sup>60</sup> According to Wigley, Alberti believed that ‘the risk of ornament is an impropriety in which the sensuality of the body confuses the mind that seeks to control it. As always, reason is threatened by the fantasised sexual mobility of the feminine.’ Ornament had to be controlled and regulated, in order

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<sup>55</sup> AGR, Books, *Palazzina al Lungo Tevere Arnaldo da Brescia della Società di Costruzioni Ing. Nervi e Nebbiosi su progetto dell’architetto G. Capponi*, (Rome: 1928), p. 1. The dedication is dated 23/12/1928.

<sup>56</sup> Papini (1929), 25.

<sup>57</sup> Zsuzsanna Ordasi, ‘Architetture e architetti italiani nella stampa ungherese (1890–1945)’, in Maria Luisa Neri (ed.), *L’Altra modernità nella cultura architettonica italiana del XX secolo*, (Rome: Gangemi, 2011), pp. 73–74.

<sup>58</sup> Altea (2012), pp. 88–89.

<sup>59</sup> The essay was written in 1908, given as a lecture in Vienna in 1910, and published in *Cahiers d’aujourd’hui*, 5 (1913), 247–56.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Wigley, ‘Untitled: the Housing of Gender’, in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 327–389.



to turn it into an expression 'of the order of the building it clothes, which is that of men.'<sup>61</sup> This stance underpinned the argument that decoration had to conform to 'the indications that were given by the architect to his artists/collaborators', as discussed in Chapter 2.<sup>62</sup>

As we have seen, Rosso generally complied with this unwritten rule; the fact that he tended to collaborate mainly with the same architects reveals a fundamental harmony that was necessary for this sort of negotiation to succeed. However, Rosso must have been eager to release his own, personal, and original voice, to avoid the danger of 'getting used to a sort of mannerism, repeating a cypher, imitating himself', as Carlo A. Felice commented in 1930.<sup>63</sup> In the next chapters, I will highlight moments of discontinuity – when a scheme seems to imbue a space with content that apparently contradicts its function, or when decoration challenges architecture by undermining its consistency and projecting the observer into an alternative, imaginative space. I consider these cases to be expressions of Rosso's conscious questioning of his own practice and its status and professional values. These dynamics will be all the more significant when, after working mainly for private patrons during the 1920s and early 1930s, Rosso became more and more involved in public commissions.

### 5.3 Authority visualised: maps of power

In the spaces *di rappresentanza* of governmental and corporate buildings, where decoration served as a means of self-assertion among a restricted audience of peers, Rosso opted for a genre that proved extremely effective in expressing political authority and economic power: the decorative map. As Monique Pelletier has argued, the expansion of cartography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an expression of the 'will of the authority', for 'those who exercise the power [...] and everyone interested in new forms of power are interested in geographical maps.'<sup>64</sup> Barber and Harper note that decorative maps 'were not primarily intended to provide geographical or locational information, but instead served broader cultural, political, and personal

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 355, 357.

<sup>62</sup> AMB, press clippings, Melchiorre Bega, 'La decorazione murale della casa', 74–75.

<sup>63</sup> Felice (1931), 47.

<sup>64</sup> Monique Pelletier, 'Carte e potere', in Andrea Nulli, Carlo Pirovano and Silvana Sermisoni (eds.), *Segni e sogni della terra. Il disegno del mondo dal mito di Atlante alla geografia delle reti*, (Novara: de Agostini, 2001), p. 81.

purposes.<sup>65</sup> Rosso's decorative maps expressed the identity of his clients in a way that fully exploited the discourses of authority and power assumed by cartography. Even in its (apparently) most innocent application – on the wall of a room in the children's quarters in the villa of entrepreneur Ignazio Centurini in Rome – the map was a declaration of status. Indeed, mural maps (together with globes and atlases) were among the educational tools of princes, who studied geography in order to be prepared for future government (fig. 5.47).<sup>66</sup>

Rosso used decorative maps mainly in the private spaces of clubs, corporations, and public institutions, where authority was held by an impersonal entity or group, rather than by an individual. One example is the scheme he designed for the new headquarters of the Real Automobil Club d'Italia (RACI – Italian Royal Car Club) in Rome, designed by Gino Franzi (1898–1971) in 1930. In the main hall (fig. 5.48), Rosso's murals took the form of hanging maps, representing the African continent (fig. 5.49), the province of Rome with consular streets converging on the Capital, and the northern and southern regions of Italy (fig. 5.50). For the centre of the room, Rosso designed a globe made of parchment that could be lit from the inside, turning into a multi-coloured lamp.<sup>67</sup>

Commentators focused on Rosso's references to 'the most renowned enterprises of Italian motoring'.<sup>68</sup> The decorator marked the expedition trails in the *Africa* mural with lines in three different colours that supposedly reproduced the colours of the Italian flag. However, instead of faithfully recording these journeys, the lines traced the composite profiles so often used by Rosso in his decorative compositions. In its overall effect, the scheme was a playful *divertissement* on the theme of geography. Rosso filled his scenes with details that delighted and distracted observers with folkloric and unexpected vignettes. For example, in his mural of southern Italy, Rosso depicted traditional modes of transport (a horse and two carriages); the only motor vehicle in the scene was stuck on the side of the road with a punctured tyre. The real focus of the scheme was the extensive web of roads available to Italian automobile owners: from the capital and its provinces, the view gradually widened to include the rest of the country, the colonies,

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Barber and Tom Harper (eds.), *Magnificent Maps. Power, propaganda, and art*, (London: The British Library, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Pelletier (2001), p. 81.

<sup>67</sup> 'Le nuove sale per i soci della sede romana del R.A.C.I.', *Domus*, 43 (1931), 42–47.

<sup>68</sup> 'La sede romana del RACI', *Casabella*, 40 (1931), 32.

and the entire globe in a visualisation of the popular motto 'all roads lead to Rome'. In his RACI murals, Rosso represented a world in which the mythic and mysterious had been relegated to the sea, while on the land, the roads of modernity opened the doors to adventurous explorations of the exotic.

This apparently innocent projection of the fantasies of modern drivers inevitably exposed a narrative of dominion and control. In the map of Africa, the shapes of the Italian colonies were sharply outlined, standing out from an otherwise indistinct territory to highlight the extent of Italian dominion. In addition, the shapes of Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia were cut up and shifted around (probably to avoid a confusing superimposition of trails) like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, making explicit the control and exploitation that the colonial relationship entailed. The fact that the islands of Sardinia and Sicily were treated in the same way in Rosso's map of southern Italy is evidence of the hierarchical tensions between the centre and the periphery (north versus south; continental versus insular; motherland versus colonies); in each case, the second element was considered marginal, underdeveloped, and passive. Untouched by the technological progress of the centre, these lands attracted the curiosity, exploitation, and propaganda of the colonisers. Car excursions were promoted, undertaken, and used as a source of national prestige, much like contemporary Antarctic expeditions, or trans-oceanic hydroplane flights.<sup>69</sup> Excursions to interior parts of the coastal colonial settlements in Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia always included members of the Istituto Geografico Militare, whose job was to study the territories. Mapping was an essential instrument for capturing and making available information about the territories that could facilitate their control.

This conflation of themes of exoticism, exploration, and the subjugation of foreign lands in the genre of the decorative map is evident in two murals that Rosso designed in Tripoli for the spaces *di rappresentanza* of the ETAL offices. One of the murals decorated the wall behind the officers' desks (fig. 5.51); the other was made for the Director's office (fig. 5.52). Both represented maps of Libya, crossed by roads that connected the main centres with oases and archaeological sites and a new road that linked the two provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Naval and aerial communications with Italy were

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<sup>69</sup> Mario Massai, 'Le squadre atlantiche di Balbo', *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, (Milan: Bestetti, 1934), p. 177.

highlighted, while the territory was dotted with genre scenes. By emphasising communications, Rosso highlighted the regime's relentless construction of infrastructures to promote its 'civilising' mission, as well as the link with the motherland, reinforcing the concept of dominion. Indeed, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, tourism was part of a strategy aimed at enhancing Italian control and this is even more evident in the mural for the Director's office.<sup>70</sup>

Here, the map representing Libya appeared to be drawn on a tilted slab of marble, fragmented at the bottom. Evidently, Rosso drew inspiration from the four maps installed in 1934 by the regime on the outer wall of the Basilica of Maxentius, overlooking the recently opened via dell'Impero in Rome.<sup>71</sup> Echoing the Roman monumental stone and marble maps often cited by ancient writers, they visualised four stages of Rome's territorial expansion, providing the current regime's imperialistic agenda with a suitable historical justification.<sup>72</sup> A fifth map was added in 1936 to commemorate the conquest of Ethiopia, explicitly linking the myth of the past with the reality of the present. Thus, Rosso borrowed a model of cartography already loaded with imperialist meaning. The reference to Libya's Roman heritage and local crafts in the foreground highlighted historical links that justified the presence of Italy in Northern Africa, while promoting the tourist attractions of the colony.

At the peak of fascist imperialist propaganda, anything and anyone could be enlisted to promote the irresistible expansion of the Italian people, even the hundreds of thousands of migrants who had been forced to leave their country to earn a living abroad. Emigration had been stigmatised by Mussolini as a major failure of democratic institutions and a threat to his demographic plan. However, the fascist ideology was so chameleon-like that even a potentially damaging issue could be re-signified, as soon as the context and approach allowed a new symbolism to emerge. In the 1932 Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (analysed in depth in Chapter 7), the section dedicated to the Fasci Italiani all'estero (Italian Fascists abroad) was characterised by 'a large globe, in copper

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<sup>70</sup> Brian L. McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya*, (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 3–5.

<sup>71</sup> The location was strategic: the via dell'Impero had been chosen to host the Palazzo del Littorio, the headquarters of the fascist party, for which a competition was held in 1934.

<sup>72</sup> Heather Hyde Minor, 'Mapping Mussolini: Ritual and Cartography in Public Art during the Second Roman Empire', *Imago Mundi*, vol. 51 (1999), pp. 147–162. In the final part of this article, Minor makes some questionable remarks about Rosso's mosaics in the Ostiense railway station and Foro Mussolini in Rome (Chapter 7), based on an inaccurate chronology and an inexact interpretation of the iconography.

and aluminium [that represented] the statistics demonstrating the “human tribute” that Italy had offered to all regions of the world since 1870.’<sup>73</sup> The haemorrhage of people forced to leave their lands and relatives to escape unemployment and starvation was turned into a ‘tribute’ that Italy was paying to speed the progress of the entire world.

Rosso’s leather map, designed for the ‘Minister’s Cabinet’ in the new Ministry of Corporations in Rome (1932; architects Piacentini and Vaccaro), conveyed the same message.<sup>74</sup> Rosso’s usual small genre scenes detailing local activities and customs were replaced with representations of Italians abroad engaged in all sorts of activities, in celebration of national ingenuity (fig. 5.53). The use of square pieces of leather, woven together and roughly stitched at the joins, showcased the material dimensions of the piece, drawing attention to its nature as a work of imagination translated onto a surface manufactured through careful artisanal labour. Previously, in 1930, in the scheme designed for the *Sala delle Statistiche* at the Home Office in the Palazzo del Viminale in Rome, Rosso used maps to illustrate ‘the data relative to Italian industriousness’ (fig. 5.54).<sup>75</sup> De-humanised through its association with statistics, here cartography expressed its essential nature as a scientific government practice aimed at enforcing a pervasive authoritarian control.<sup>76</sup>

The association of the decorative map with the theme of labour proved to be a particularly apt metaphor for economic power. Rosso used it on a spectacular scale in the wall mosaic for the entrance hall of the Edificio Matarazzo in Sao Paulo, Brazil (architects Piacentini and Ballio Morpurgo). Although Piacentini had been commissioned to build this structure in 1934, work proceeded slowly; Rosso’s designs were not turned into mosaic panels by Giulio Padoan’s workshop in Venice until 1941–1942.<sup>77</sup> These panels were only installed after the war, when Francisco Matarazzo Jr called Rosso to Sao Paulo to supervise operations, prompting the decorator’s relocation to Brazil. In the

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<sup>73</sup> Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi (eds.), *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, (Rome: PNF, 1933), p. 235. The walls of the final section featured ‘large and suggestive’ maps, with black flags pinpointing foreign branches of the fascist party (p. 238).

<sup>74</sup> Enrico Castello, ‘Il Palazzo delle Corporazioni’, *Lidl*, 4 (1930), 221–223.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Ambienti d’Oggi’, *Domus*, 11 (1930), 62–63. The rooms were refurbished by architect Giovanni Michelucci. The murals were created by two artists known only by their surnames: Barbi and Brevignati.

<sup>76</sup> The importance that Mussolini attached to statistics as a tool for management and control is considered by Jean-Guy Prévost in his *A Total Science: Statistics in Liberal and Fascist Italy*, (Montreal: McGill & Queen’s University Press, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Giuseppe Colechi, ‘Il Mosaico’, *Strenna dei Romanisti*, (1942), 87–94. The mosaic is still in its original location; the building now hosts the Sao Paulo Regional Prefecture.

huge entrance hall of the building, looming above six lifts giving access to fourteen floors that hosted the headquarters of the Industrie Riunite Francesco Matarazzo (IRFM), the mosaics, with their enormous scale and prominent position, were a resonant visual declaration of identity and power. Drawings and sketches kept in Rosso's archive allow us to speculate about how he developed his strategy and objectives.

Initially, Rosso opted for a composition that included both northern and southern America, prominently featuring Brazil (fig. 5.55). The space around the continents was filled in with a compass rose and two scenes representing a shipping yard on the right, and a cityscape dominated by skyscrapers, industrial chimneys, and a building yard in the foreground. In Rosso's second proposal, the naval industry and Matarazzo's factories framed Brazil, which was now centre stage, with its states highlighted, alongside the star, symbol of the federation (fig. 5.56).<sup>78</sup> In his third sketch (fig. 5.57), Rosso focused on representing economic activities in a setting now identifiable as São Paulo, in which well-known landmarks such as the BANESPA skyscraper and the *Edificio Martinelli* are clearly delineated. These sketches shift the focus from a Pan-American vision to one centred on Brazil and its financial capital. Rosso clearly set out to identify the corporation with the geographical territory covered by its economic interests.

In the version eventually implemented, these connections are reinforced further (fig. 5.58). Brazil retains its central position, with each region identified by name, typical products, economic activities, and local fauna and flora. The focus is on the nation's resources; Rosso's model is the 1937 economic map of Brazil by Carlos Alberto Gonsalves.<sup>79</sup> However, at the foot of the image, instead of bustling urban scenes dominated by the verticality of skyscrapers and chimneys, Rosso places in the foreground a woman surrounded by baskets full of fruit and vegetables, and a *gaucho* in a forest wood factory. The countryside encroaches on industrial cities, painting a more conservative portrait of the country, with its predominantly rural population and still largely agricultural economy. At the same time, Rosso reinforces references to the Matarazzos. On the map, the city of Sao Paulo is now identified using the corporation's logo, its motto (*'fides, honor, labor'*), and the representation of Piacentini's building,

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<sup>78</sup> This drawing is annotated with the dimensions of the intended panel (2.13x1.83), which was far smaller than the one that would later be installed (around seven meters by six).

<sup>79</sup> A copy of the map (013275) is kept in the AGR.

promoted at the rank of iconic landmark. In addition, two new allegories have been introduced near the top: two reclining female figures surrounded by attributes represent Brazil and Italy. This was an extremely personal reference; Rosso was celebrating the origins of the Matarazzos and that family's continuing links to the motherland, which had rewarded their substantial financial contribution during the World War I with the title of Count.

At first sight, Rosso's mosaics give the impression of a nationalistic celebration of Brazil, whose gigantic shape dominates the wall. Thanks to the widespread use of maps in education and the media, the shape given to countries by their political boundaries had become a typically modern symbol of nationality. It was an extremely versatile iconographic solution, because, as political and satirical newspaper cartoons demonstrated, the shape could be filled in or manipulated to suit the symbolic needs of the designer and/or patron. In this case, Rosso reshaped the economic map of Brazil by associating the products, costumes, and activities of the federated states with the interests of the IRFM, the second largest corporation in Brazil at the time. In this way, the IRFM *became* Brazil; an ambiguous cause-and-effect relationship characterised the private and collective identities of the corporation and nation. Were the vastness, richness, and resourcefulness of Brazil – their splendour enhanced by the choice of a bright shade of yellow for the background – the source of the corporation's prosperity – or the other way around?

### **Conclusion.** The decorator's home

In analysing Rosso's way of expressing the status, gender, and authority of his patrons through the decoration of *rappresentanza* interiors, the opinions and preferences of his patrons are often difficult to pin down. According to Ponti, the typical brief that a decorator could expect from a patron was as follow:

'Here we want a mosaic floor, there you shall design a stuccowork ceiling; here the wall must be depicted in fresco, and there with tempera. We would like this portico decorated with a mosaic of small stones, and that room with a floor of

marble intarsia etc. etc.; here the dimensions, the plans, the elevations, and the sections; we like this style.’<sup>80</sup>

The decorator had to interpret the more or less fixed set of expectations and aspirations associated with his patrons’ class, social status, position in society, stereotypical roles, and domains differentiated by gender, as well as the less predictable personal tastes, preferences, and passions that characterised their individualities. At the same time, his own practice required that Rosso’s proposals be subjected to the guidance of the architect, adding a further actor to an already extremely complex creative process.

Therefore, among all of the interiors Rosso designed, the one he created for his own house in Rome is of particular interest. Removed from any possible constraint dictated by patronage or architecture, here Rosso had the chance to express his own, unadulterated ideas of interior decoration. In 1931, two photographs of his flat in 91 via Nimorese, Rome were published in *Domus*.<sup>81</sup> For the walls of his bedroom, Rosso designed abstract geometric forms in different shades (fig. 5.59). By contrast, the atrium featured a low sofa-cabinet placed against a wall adorned with extremely stylised and naïve motives of plants and fishes, which played with the form of a lamp by Napoleone Martinuzzi placed nearby (fig. 5.60). The respectively abstract and light-hearted nature of these two schemes reflects Rosso’s anxieties about the public versus private dialectic of decorated spaces. In the atrium, where he received guests and presented his public face, Rosso showed his diverting side, confirming the view of his work endorsed by critics and patrons: whimsical, sophisticated, and elegant. On the sofa, his round spectacles, a tool of work and recognition, lay abandoned with calculated nonchalance: they stand as a signature, asserting authorship as well as ownership. The bedroom is instead an intimate space, in which the undiluted self is permitted to emerge. Surprisingly, here the scheme complies with that ‘architecture of tones of colours’ recommended by rationalist architect Giuseppe Pagano in his book on the modern decorative arts as a necessary alternative to the old-fashioned figurative decoration such as the atrium scheme.<sup>82</sup> By using it in his bedroom, Rosso seems to express a personal preference at odds with his usual decorative practice.

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<sup>80</sup> Ponti 11 (1928), 22.

<sup>81</sup> Felice (1931), 48.

<sup>82</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, *Arte decorativa italiana*, (Milan: Hoepli, 1938), p. 35.



As soon as these schemes were published in specialised magazines, they became available to a public much broader than the limited group of relatives and guests, casual visitors, and colleagues admitted to Rosso's house. In the pages of *Domus*, the striking contrast between the two *private* schemes became part of a strategy of *public* self-promotion. Crucially, they were not presented as made for his own house, but simply labelled, 'casa R.'. Otherwise, Rosso would have appeared as a supporter of the views and values of the rationalist polemicists. Decorative schemes of the kind suggested by Pagano had been attempted in rare cases, usually in exceptional contexts where uncompromisingly modern forms had been requested. By presenting his schemes as commissions, like every other, Rosso shielded himself from being personally associated with a tendency that, theoretically, loathed the decoration for which he was known and respected. His personal preferences remained concealed from the public behind a vague 'R.', while he reinforced his public identity and status as an extremely versatile, up-to-date decorator, able to master the most advanced tendencies, if asked.

After the *Sala dei Cavallini*, Rosso's bedchamber in via Nimorense further reveals his anxiety about experimenting with new approaches, or challenging the rules and traditions of decoration by incorporating elements of new visual languages characterised by displacement, incongruity, and abstraction. Rosso's clients and the architects with whom he collaborated viewed these experiments with suspicion. Indeed, in addition to rejecting the common elements of social distinction, they also challenged the hierarchical dominion of architecture over decoration. Not by chance, these two works were created in contexts in which the usual process of negotiation was briefly suspended by the absence of a demanding patron or controlling architect. Within the space of a temporary exhibition or his own private and intimate domestic space (maybe also in the dining room of the outsider, Mrs Gould), Rosso freed himself from expectations linked to his status as a fashionable decorator for the elite. Conflicts emerged between the public and private spheres, between necessities and predilections, and between being a decorator and a fine artist. Was Rosso a 'decorator of truly modern homes'? Maybe Margherita Sarfatti was right.<sup>83</sup> If only more 'truly modern homes' had been built in Italy during that period...

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<sup>83</sup> See footnote 20.

## 6. The art of seduction: commercial and leisure decoration

*'With Bega, the shop and the drawing room flaunt the stigmata of the rationalist asceticism. If in those patisseries some small worldly squiggle survives on a wide, severe wall, if some decorative residues seem to bridge between the taste of decadent Europe and that of new Europe, these compromises are always displayed with such an elegant shamelessness that their deception looks, more than ever, provisional.'*<sup>1</sup>

Architect Melchiorre Bega (1898–1976) had, for Giolli, the merit of having 'brought to the highstreets of Italy the polemics of the Triennale.' The critic celebrated the modern design of his shops, which could be experienced directly by 'the common people.'<sup>2</sup> Yet, because of his own adherence to functionalism, Giolli loathed the concessions to decoration that still punctuated Bega's otherwise rationalist architecture. In fact, the architect's approach was common practice. As Carlo A. Felice observed, the new and refurbished shops opening all over Italy 'show the modern concepts [of interior design] practically applied and happily realised, from the signs to the windows, to the lights, to the shiny furniture, the internal settings, and the decoration of ceilings and walls'.<sup>3</sup> Rosso, one of Bega's main collaborators, played a major role in defining a decorative language for these privately owned but publicly experienced spaces.<sup>4</sup> Through a process of glamorising commodities, his decorative schemes aimed to persuade customers to buy a certain product, trust a service provider, or indulge their escapist fantasies. Although Rosso never engaged directly with advertising, his schemes followed strategies of visual communication that were typical of promotions. Indeed, as a decorator, he easily reconciled the dichotomy between fine and commercial arts that had troubled fine artists and intellectuals since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> His schemes represent a compelling example of cross-genre approach, aimed at providing commercial spaces with the most effective forms of decoration possible. In this chapter,

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<sup>1</sup> Raffaello Giolli, 'L'opera di Melchiorre Bega', *Casabella*, 119 (1937), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Carlo A. Felice, 'Pitture e ambienti di Giulio Rosso', *Domus*, 10 (1931), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Two small frescos on wooden panels by Giulio Rosso, representing scenes of life in a coastal city, are still part of the private collection of Bega's heirs (visited in June 2014). For Bega's complete work, see: Stefano Zironi, *Melchiorre Bega architetto*, (Milan: Domus, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Michele H. Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 7–8.

I explore the mechanisms that Rosso devised to respond to an emerging culture of consumption, in which decorators were expected to welcome and satisfy consumers as part of their usual audience.<sup>6</sup>

In the first part of this chapter, I shall discuss the themes that Rosso selected to communicate prestige, efficiency, control, and investment in commercial decoration, namely, the past, technology and mythology, local culture, and labour. His interpretation of the theme of labour, in particular, can help us to understand the role of the audience in Rosso's designs, and his late shift from a form of promotional decoration to one that aimed to develop empathy. Next, this chapter will analyse the schemes he designed for leisure venues, showing how the decorator drew on a complex set of audience expectations involving the picturesque, exoticism, elegance, and luxury to win over potential clients. Indeed, hotels, ocean liners, restaurants, and even casinos can be viewed as spaces where functions similar to those of a house are carried out for commercial purposes, creating 'homes away from home.'<sup>7</sup> Yet, while the décor of a house reflects and represents its owner's cultural and social mores, leisure buildings must reflect those of potential guests. Again, the consideration of the decoration's audience becomes pivotal. Many of these spaces were shaped around a cosmopolitan, refined, and well-to-do clientele. At the same time, as D. Medina Lasansky has shown, leisure 'in the 1930s was re-tailored [by Fascism] as a patriotic activity for the Italian working and middle class.'<sup>8</sup> Engaging with the fantasies of the public at large prepared Rosso for his later involvement in decorative works for spaces of mass spectacle promoted by Fascism, as the next chapter will discuss.

Some of the solutions that Rosso developed for commercial and promotional decorative schemes (appropriating the past, showcasing the spectacle of technology, and celebrating labour) were equally suitable for ideological signification. In the last part of this chapter, I will analyse cases in which the commercial and political identity of a space overlapped, exploring the careful selection and adaptation process that Rosso used to make familiar themes work in different contexts. The use of style as a tool in Rosso's

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<sup>6</sup> Alberto Abruzzese, 'Transiti verso la pubblicità', in Alberto Abruzzese and Simona De Iulio (eds.), *Lumi di progresso. Comunicazione e persuasione alle origini della cartellonistica italiana*, (Treviso: Canova, 1996), pp. 9–10.

<sup>7</sup> Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected. Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 256.

eclectic, ever adaptable, decorative practice will be highlighted, as well as episodes of discontinuity and exception that emphasise the strategic role of decoration in defining a space.

### 6.1 Commercial decoration: the authority of the past, supernatural powers, and the celebration of human effort

As seen in Chapter 4, in his Jesurum room at the 1927 Monza Biennial, Rosso met the challenge of creating a space that, while suggesting a domestic interior, also functioned as a showroom. His *Legend of Lace* murals turned the mythical origins of the craft into the history of a company; visualising an illustrious tradition – a past (whether factual or legendary) – proved to be a powerful agent of promotion. When a historical incident or legend was not available, Rosso made one up. The shop of the tailor Ciro Giuliano in Rome (1928), for instance, was enlivened and ennobled by two mural paintings: *The choice of the suit* and *The story of the suit*.<sup>9</sup> In the former, Rosso depicted a tailor dealing with a client and the client's friend, who, while lying on a sofa, dispenses precious and troublesome advice on the outfit (fig. 6.1). In the latter, the decorator told a story in five episodes – a young man buys a suit which, in the last panel, is spoiled by a clumsy waiter; the scenes are separated by geometrical forms and stylised flowers and plants (fig. 6.2). As the fashion of the suits makes clear, both the stories of the petulant and ill-fated dandies are set in the early nineteenth century. Halfway between the genres of satirical illustration and historical wall painting, Rosso's murals gave Giuliano two tailor-made ancestral fashion myths. They were amusing, but also subtly moralistic, probably reflecting the vision of the patron, one of the most sought-after tailors of the time.<sup>10</sup>

For the Café Motta in piazza Duomo in Milan (architect Melchiorre Bega, 1933), home to the embroidery room analysed in Chapter 4, Rosso mobilised a more complex set of suggestions by focusing on the commodity's image, brand, and role in local culture.<sup>11</sup> His mosaics, installed by Salviati of Venice on the corner wall behind the counter of the ground floor bar, in front of the entrance to the café (fig. 6.3), referred to a history of

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<sup>9</sup> The space was refurbished by architect Luciano Tufaroli. A.F., 'Le piacevoli risorse decorative ed architettoniche di un ambiente', *Domus*, 6 (1928), 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> Guido Vergani, *Sarti d'Abruzzo. Le botteghe di ieri e oggi protagoniste del vestire maschile*, (Milan: Skira, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> 'L'architettura e l'arredamento di una moderna pasticceria dell'architetto Melchiorre Bega', *Lidel*, 4 (1934), 236–237.

baking. Began with the Egyptians, the craft is shown passing through Greece and Rome, and culminating in the invention of the *panettone*, which was both the traditional Milanese cake and Motta's speciality (fig. 6.4). Taking advantage of the corner, Rosso divided his three 'antique' scenes from the episodes set in medieval, Renaissance, and contemporary Milan (fig. 6.5). By representing the old Milanese custom of cutting the Christmas bread (a prerogative of the householder) and the legend of the presentation of the '*Pan de Toni*' to Ludovico il Moro, ruler of Milan (1494–99), the company had its history anchored to that of the city for which it was preserving 'good traditions'. At the same time, Rosso highlighted the company's important role in the contemporary history of Milan: the last section of the mosaic showed, as its background, Motta's brand-new factory in viale Corsica. From there, clients were ingeniously persuaded to perceive a global perspective: the smoke rising from the chimneys of Motta's factory formed the shapes of continents to which its products were exported. At the same time, Rosso emphasised the message by inserting significant visual and textual elements, such as the bell-shaped form of a sliced *panettone*, which recurred in the company's 1930s advertising campaign, the address of the first Motta bakery (via Chiusa), and its date of foundation (1919).

This strong association between architectural decoration and the identity of the business was justified by the location of the café. This was Motta's flagship shop, located on the corner between piazza Duomo and the entrance to the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II ('the *salotto* of Milan'). On the opposite side of the street was the Camparino, a historical café famous for mosaics designed in 1922 by Angiolo D'Andrea (1880–1942) (fig. 6.6). Rosso's mosaics were probably a response to that earlier artwork. While D'Andrea had infused the Camparino space with the chromatic splendour of his naturalist motifs, Rosso's designs conveyed pride in the company's historical role in Milanese culture and economy. In his contemporary decorative scheme for the Motta café in the more peripheral location of largo del Carrobbio, Rosso's focus shifted towards the products: the inevitable *panettone*, liqueurs, and boxes of sweets, all visibly branded, featured in idyllic scenes with women and men (one dressed as a harlequin), enjoying themselves among guitars and exotic vegetation (figs. 6.7, 6.8).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Un bar a Milano dell'architetto Melchiorre Bega', *Casabella*, 2 (1933), 38–39.

In the Motta mosaics, local legends and traditions were interwoven with references to ancient times to emphasise the present status of the company. Rosso played constantly with these elements, varying their reciprocal resonance each time, to reflect his brief. For instance, when the link with contemporaneity was omitted, as in the six panels designed for the café-restaurant San Pietro in Bologna (1929), Rosso seduced his audience by exploiting the lure of nostalgia. This venue, located near the cathedral, was one of the most popular rendezvous in Bologna; Rosso turned its interiors into a celebration of the city. Urban landmarks, such as the medieval towers, the Palazzo Comunale, the river harbour and old customs house, the arcades, and the surrounding hills, provided backdrops for historical events – including the first balloon flight made by Francesco Zambecari in October 1803 – as well as genre scenes set, once again, in the early nineteenth century (figs. 6.9–6.14). If, on the one hand, the century-old venue was presented to its clientele as a witness to the history of Bologna, on the other hand, Rosso's scene also created a tension between the past and present appearance of the city: many of the urban contexts represented by Rosso had profoundly altered.

The chapel of Santa Maria delle Grazie, represented at the foot of the Torre Garisenda in the balloon flight scene, had been destroyed in 1871 to '*liberare*' (make visible) the medieval structure of the tower (fig. 6.9).<sup>13</sup> Via del Mercato di Mezzo, the background in Rosso's scene of people feasting outside a typical tavern, had been wiped out in 1916 to allow public transport to pass through the city centre (fig. 6.13). The area of the river harbour had also been profoundly modified; the customs house would be pulled down in 1933 (fig. 6.14). Also in this case Rosso used history as a way to validate the continuity and quality of the venue. However, without the necessary connection with the present, his imagery evoked romantic longing for the 'good old days' and an urban landscape that no longer existed. The potential unease generated by the contrast between modernisation and nostalgia was toned down by Rosso's repertoire of recurrent 'delightful' and 'nice' details and vignettes – the small dog, the grape harvest, the flirting – all of which contributed to his usual 'gaiety' of expression.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The restoration practice of *liberazione* consisted of freeing monuments from subsequent additions and isolating them from other structures. Michele Lamprakos, 'The Idea of the Historic City', *Change over time*, 4 (2014), 16–17.

<sup>14</sup> Orazia Belsito Prini, 'Pannelli di Giulio Rosso per un ristorante bolognese', *Casabella*, 3 (1929), 33–36.

In the absence of a commodity or a brand to glamorise, as in spaces where a service was provided, Rosso focused on expressions of efficiency and power. Reliability was invoked by images of natural forces, obstacles, and distances being controlled: technology was the main theme, occasionally reinforced through an association with classical myths. Again, the location of the commission mattered. For example, schemes located in Milan and Turin, Italy's main industrial cities, focused on technology and labour, while in Rome and Naples, Rosso favoured an interplay with themes derived from mythology. A significant example is his scheme for the headquarters of the Adamello Electric Company in Milan (1929).<sup>15</sup> In the *Sala degli sportelli*, where customers were received, three panels illustrated the production and distribution of hydroelectric energy (fig. 6.15). In Rosso's panels, nature, stripped of any picturesque character, was subdued by technological power (figs. 6.16–18). Through ingeniously structured compositions, in which he recklessly guided the observer through dizzying bird's-eye views and dramatically foreshortened perspectives, Rosso showed the magnificence of dams, conduits, turbines, and pylons, whose proportions, in comparison with the men operating them, were colossal. The impression of a complicated and potentially dangerous process, or the threatening impact of enormous architectural structures that recalled the monumental futuristic buildings sketched by Antonio Sant'Elia (1888–1916), were balanced by pleasantly gracious and eye-catching details. The man lying in a field, reading a book; the man checking the turbine; the traveller waiting patiently outside the railway station café – all these spoke of full control, precision, and reliability.

In some schemes, drawing on an established tendency of advertising, Rosso associated technology with classical mythology to emphasise the concept of control. The two themes merged on the walls of the writing room of the Palazzo delle Poste of Naples (1936), designed by Giuseppe Vaccaro (1896–1970) and Gino Franzi. Unfortunately, only two black and white photographs of the scheme survive, reproducing its complex iconography only partially and vaguely. Various modes of transportation, buildings, and irregular shapes resembling a coastline or the border between two countries are presided over by the huge figure of Hermes, Greek protector of commerce,

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<sup>15</sup> Ego Sum, 'La nuova e bella sede della Società Elettrica Adamello', *La Casa Bella*, 10 (1929), 13–19; 'Società Generale Elettrica dell'Adamello', *Rassegna di Architettura*, 3 (1930), 81–86. The building, designed by Ulderico Tononi, Pietro Cassinoni, and Agnoldomenico Pica, is currently abandoned. It has not been possible to find out if the panels are still in situ.

communications, and travel (fig. 6.19, 6.20). Rosso's murals for the Naples Post Office engaged with many of the issues raised by the futurists' *Manifesto della Plastica Murale*.<sup>16</sup> They presented a bold simplification of forms and the use of abstraction, recalling works by the second generation of futurist artists such as Fillia (Luigi Colombo, 1904–1936) (fig. 6.21). While celebrating modernity by representing the myth of technology, they also present an element of technical experimentation: they were made from a new, industrial material, the glass mosaics called 'Desegnat'.<sup>17</sup> As seen in Chapter 2, Enrico Prampolini, the artist behind the above-mentioned *Manifesto*, acknowledged Rosso's status during this period.

Rosso's interest in futurist decoration may have been inspired by the work of Edoardo del Neri. In 1932, Rosso had been asked to complete a panel for the Palazzo delle Poste in Gorizia, left unfinished after del Neri's sudden death.<sup>18</sup> The work, entitled *The wealth of communication and commercial traffic*, placed the myth of Danae (depicted in a tent at the centre of the scene) in an exotic landscape that included references to northern African architecture and, in the background, a tower rising towards the sky amidst a triumph of airplanes, trains, ships, bridges, and cranes (fig. 6.22). Both del Neri and the designer of the building, the architect Angiolo Mazzoni (1894–1979), were moving closer toward the aesthetics of the second wave of Futurism.<sup>19</sup> The composition used classical iconography to ennoble and make explicit the celebration of progress that underpinned Futurism's favourite themes and stylistic solutions: dynamic signs, aerial perspective, and streamlined deformations. Although Rosso did not modify del Neri's original composition (the cartoon of the panel still exists: fig. 6.24), he must have considered it relevant, and a reference for potential future developments.<sup>20</sup>

In Rosso's use of the theme of technology, the scheme he designed for the STIPEL (Società Telefonica Interregionale Piemontese e Lombarda) telephone centre in piazza

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<sup>16</sup> The *Manifesto* was published in the catalogue of the second exhibition of the *Plastica Murale*, held in Rome in 1936 (the first was held in Genoa in 1934). *Seconda Mostra Nazionale di Plastica Murale per l'Edilizia Fascista in Italia e in Africa*, (Rome: Edizioni futuriste di "Poesia", 1936); Enrico Crispolti, *Storia e critica del Futurismo*, (Bari: Laterza, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Annibale Vitellozzi, 'Il Nuovo Palazzo Postale di Napoli', *Edilizia Moderna*, 23 (1936), 8. An inspection carried out in December 2015 to find out if the scheme was extant proved unsuccessful.

<sup>18</sup> 'Il Palazzo delle Poste e dei Telegrafi di Gorizia', *Le Tre Venezie*, 3 (1933), 148.

<sup>19</sup> Edoardo Del Neri: *il fondo Del Neri ai Musei provinciali di Gorizia*, (Gorizia: Comunicarte, 2004); Massimiliano Vittori (ed.), *Angiolo Mazzoni (1894–1979): Architetto Futurista*, (Latina: Ass. Cult. Novecento, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Edoardo (2004), p. 78.



Castello in Turin (engineer Franco dal Corno; 1930) represented a watershed moment. Here, human figures, perhaps for the first time, were neither the protagonists in a humorous pantomime, nor depicted as decorative puppets. The STIPEL commissioned Rosso to design the interior of a waiting room (wall and floor decorations and furniture); it was a raised circular space, covered by a dome and accessed by steps, located at the end of a corridor with telephone booths (fig. 6.23, 6.24).<sup>21</sup> On two large mural panels, Rosso depicted the installation of the subterranean ‘Ponti’ cable, which had linked Turin, Milan, and Switzerland by telephone in 1929 (fig. 6.25, 6.26).<sup>22</sup> This proud display of technological primacy (the cable was the longest ever laid) was honoured alongside the coordinated efforts of the workers who made it possible. The academic studies that Rosso carried out while *Pensionato* (1927–29) favoured a more anatomically naturalistic representation of the human figure. This became more central to his compositions, alongside an emphasis on monumental gestures and poses. In this mural, as well as in some contemporary drawings, one can see the influence of the art of Ferruccio Ferrazzi (1891–1978), for whom Rosso had worked as a teaching assistant of the *Decorazione* course in the Museo Artistico Industriale (MAI) (figs. 6.27, 6.28).<sup>23</sup> Rosso must also have known the work of the Roman *Novecentisti*, who exhibited in Rome in 1927 and had studios in villa Strohl-Fern, where he too was based for a time.<sup>24</sup>

The STIPEL murals do not introduce the heroic representation of workers that will become prevalent in later works by Rosso. Here, the narrative is much more nuanced, because it targets a specific, elite audience. Both the figure of the worker rolling up his sleeves in the countryside scene and the businessman talking on the phone in the urban one boldly project into the space of the waiting room. However, while the former

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<sup>21</sup> A. Melis, ‘Posto telefonico della STIPEL a Torino’, *Architettura e Art Decorative*, 7 (1931), 336–340. Over the doors between the atrium and the corridor of phone booths, Rosso created two allegories of the era. Archivio Storico-Iconografico SIP, Fondo Fotografico, STIPEL Torino Piazza Castello. The centre does not exist anymore.

<sup>22</sup> The designer of the cable, engineer Gian Giacomo Ponti (1878–1939), was the head of the STIPEL.

<sup>23</sup> ACS, Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale AABBA, Div. III, 1925/29, b. 39, fasc. ‘Roma, MAI, Incarichi’. Rosso was employed by the MAI in November 1928, apparently chosen by Ferrazzi himself (probably on the advice of Papini, director of the school). When, in March 1929, Ferrazzi resigned, he recommended Rosso as his replacement. Once in charge, Rosso chose Ernesto Puppo as his own assistant.

<sup>24</sup> Lucia Stefanelli Torossi (ed.), *Gli Artisti di Villa Strohl-Fern*, (Rome: De Luca, 1983), p. 122. The Novecento movement was formed in 1922 as an association of seven painters. The critic Margherita Sarfatti (1880–1961) managed to turn it into a national movement, championing a vague programme that promoted a return to order and an ambiguous match between tradition and modernity. After two national exhibitions (1926 and 1929), the movement collapsed. See Rossana Bossaglia, *Il Novecento Italiano*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979).

presents his shoulders to clients, the latter engages with them. Among the human figures that populate Rosso's village and city, it is the young man in a suit who is the final beneficiary of technological progress. This figure is therefore identified with 'the elegant elite of Turin', who, according to an anonymous journalist's comment on the opening of the centre, passed and met 'at that particular corner of the arcades, in some hours of the day.'<sup>25</sup> Rosso was also responding to the hybrid nature of the waiting room: instrumental to the smooth running of the commercial service on the one hand; relaxing and semi-domestic on the other. Indeed, the geometrical partitions with which he decorated the base of the wall and the ceiling, as well as a meandering border on the floor, were clearly derived from his contemporary schemes for private bourgeois houses, examined in Chapter 5.

In projects developed during the second half of the 1930s for corporate patrons, Rosso acknowledged the anti-bourgeoisie and anti-urban shift that Fascism was promoting through its propaganda.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary working class men and women replaced divinities and middle-class figures, while establishing a more balanced relationship with technology. However, Rosso's works could not disguise either the ambiguities of Fascism's discourse on progress and economic and social development, or the exploitative and imperialistic drive of its policies. The scheme for the Albanian National Bank in Tirana (1938) is an example. Architect Ballio Morpurgo assigned to Rosso the wall below the ceiling of the circular public hall. The mosaic frieze (installed by the SARIM Company, supervised by Giulio Padoan of Venice) depicted, in a sort of two-dimensional diorama, the wealth of activities – horse breeding, fishing and construction, agriculture and farming – financed by the bank and coordinated by the Società per lo Sviluppo Economico dell'Albania (SVEA) (figs. 6.29, 6.30).<sup>27</sup> The association of construction with fishing and sailing referred to the port of Durazzo, which from 1928 onwards had absorbed the lion's share of the bank's resources.

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<sup>25</sup> AGR, press clippings, 'Il nuovo ufficio telefonico sotto i portici di piazza Castello'.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> The League of Nations charged Italy with the responsibility for setting up a national bank in Albania to boost the nation's economy. This strong link was determined by the fact that, during World War I, Albania was occupied by the Italian army, which withdrew only in 1920. Once Mussolini had consolidated his regime, he used the Bank and the SVEA to enforce an intrusive financial policy, directed at increasing Italian influence in the Balkans; Albania was annexed by Italy in May 1939.

However, it is worth noting that the main section of the mosaic – in front of the main entrance – was dedicated to an oil extraction tower set in the midst of an Albanian mountainous landscape populated by horses (fig. 6.31). This detail must have related to the Italian National Railway's release of huge fields for the exploitation of Albanian oil, overseen by the SVEA; in 1937, these oil fields met 30% of Italian demand.<sup>28</sup> As he had done in the Adamello in Milan, Rosso made the mechanism the real protagonist of this scheme. Yet, rather than inspiring wonder, the extraction tower, dominating the wild landscape, clearly visualised the Italian exploitation of Albanian natural resources. Albanian people did not participate in this technological progress; they appear only at the two edges of the space, being visually and materially marginalised (fig. 6.32). Rosso's depiction of the bank's mission revealed the true, colonialist, nature of the relationship between Italy and the Balkan country it controlled.

The celebration of collective effort and labour lent itself well to the fascist regime's rhetoric of dominion: Rosso used it often in his decorative schemes for public spaces (examined in Chapter 7). However, by the end of the decade and during the early 1940s, this discourse must have begun to look worn-out. Private commissions, less subjected to the control of Fascism's cultural impresarios, allowed the expression of a less optimistic vision of the future. Monumentality gave way to a more realistic approach: the human protagonists of Rosso's 'epics of construction' were often shown frozen in the midst of action or blocked in a moment of rest; they always looked pensive, with a mixture of moods. At the same time, his decorative language began to develop new stylistic suggestions. Contours begun to blur; the construction of space became increasingly ambiguous and vague; narratives were broken into apparently unconnected simultaneous actions; proportions were expressively stretched; dark and brownish colours replaced his usually bright palette; and tones, rather than lines, became the formative element in his images.

These elements reflect Rosso's interest in the painters of the so-called 'Scuola Romana'.<sup>29</sup> Rosso had met Alberto Ziveri (1908–1990) and Pericle Fazzini (1913–1987)

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<sup>28</sup> Lorenzo Iaselli, 'L'espansione finanziaria dell'Italia in Albania (1925–1943)', in *Centro e periferia nella storia finanziaria italiana dall'Unità all'UE*, Seminar proceedings, Cassino, 26–27/09/2003, pp. 72, 84–86.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 5, footnote 50.

at the MAI.<sup>30</sup> They became close friends, and Rosso was visibly influenced by their approach to painting, as well as that of Corrado Cagli (1910–1976) and Guglielmo Janni (1892–1958).<sup>31</sup> Since 1930, the painters of this school had researched and adapted a style that featured formal simplification, an archaic sense of the line (almost Etruscan), and the use of warm and opaque tonalities. Rosso's move towards the Scuola Romana is singular, given his profession: the expressionist or 'savage' realism of those artists was so personal and uncompromising that it rarely found its way onto the walls of private patrons.<sup>32</sup> Their involvement in public architectural projects could be controversial, as their approach aimed to generate emotion, rather than to educate or inspire. Nevertheless, Rosso must have found something promising in this approach. His schemes from the early 1940s marked a change toward forms of decoration that demanded the active participation of viewers. Observers had to make an effort to reconstruct or recognise the narrative, often by comparing it with their own experience.

In the fresco for the writing room of the Post Office in Alessandria (March 1941), for example, the scenes representing workers above and below the ground implementing technological progress were placed to the sides of a central scene that showed a postman delivering a letter from a husband, father, or brother at the front to his wife, mother, or sister. This image captured the atmosphere of anxiety, hope, and fear that characterised the first year of the war (fig. 6.33).<sup>33</sup> Thanks to a more careful observation of reality, Rosso also acknowledged the changing roles of women under the contradictory policies of the fascist regime; they are shown working behind the counter and dealing with technology.<sup>34</sup> Rosso's target audience had also changed: the 1930

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<sup>30</sup> ACS, Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale AABBA, Div. VI, 1936/40, b. 78, fasc. Incarichi. In 1937, Ziveri was Rosso's assistant; Fazzini taught Sculptural Decoration.

<sup>31</sup> Pier Maria Bardi (1900–1999), prominent journalist, gallerist, and champion of the architectural and artistic Italian avant-garde, presenting a solo exhibition of Rosso's paintings in Sao Paulo in 1968, wrote that he had met Rosso in Rome, and that he was part of the Scuola Romana. AGR, Documents, Pier Maria Bardi, *Giulio Rosso*, Galeria Atrium, Sao Paulo, April 1968. Both in the first (1931) and fourth (1943) Roman Quadriennale exhibitions of national art, Rosso's works were displayed in the same room as those of Ziveri and other artists of the Scuola Romana. See *Prima Quadriennale d'Arte Nazionale*, (Rome: Enzo Pinci, 1931), p. 108 and *Quarta quadriennale d'arte nazionale*, (Rome: Mediterranea, 1943), p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Barilli, Renato, 'I realisti "selvaggi" degli anni Trenta', in Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant (eds.), *Arte Italiana. Presenze 1900–1945*, (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), pp. 245–253.

<sup>33</sup> The building was designed by architect Franco Petrucci (1905–1982), a colleague of Rosso's at the MAI, where he taught architecture. See: ACS, 1936/40, Incarichi.

<sup>34</sup> Maria Freddosio, 'Review of Victoria de Grazia *Le Donne del Regime Fascista*', *Storia Contemporanea*, 2 (1995), 335–344.

businessmen in suit were replaced by soldiers and a humble working-class population waiting for news and parcels, or managing their savings (fig. 6.34).<sup>35</sup>

In his fresco for the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL) in via del Corso in Rome (architect Vittorio Morpurgo, 1941) Rosso's interest in an empathic approach to decoration is even more evident – so much so that it undermines the promotional purpose of the project. The work, which decorated the lobby of the bank, was intended to create a flattering image of the social mission and name of the credit company (fig. 6.35).<sup>36</sup> Rosso depicted miners and builders in the process of extracting raw materials from a quarry, processing, and using them to erect the wall of a new building. Two, more marginal, groups busy themselves with activities related to agriculture and metallurgy. To amplify the sense of an exclusively human (and masculine) drama, there are no natural elements: a square, three-windowed factory, cranes, a ship, and geometric shapes that stand for other buildings loom on the horizon, dividing the red-ochre land from a grey-violet sky. Details, such as the factory and a red truck, place the action in a vivid contemporaneity. By disregarding the rules of proportion and placing groups of workers in different dimensions on a common ground, Rosso undermined the unity of space and action, suggesting a symbolic interpretation. At the same time, all allegorical details are rejected: a preparatory sketch in which one third of the space was taken up with an allegory of abundance was discarded (fig. 6.36).<sup>37</sup> Instead, Rosso arranged the composition to make clear that the acme of the workers' collective action was the building of the wall: the representation of an entire community in an effort of construction had to synthesise the benefits of credit, as it had often done, in work of art and decoration of the period, those of Fascism.

However, Rosso's builders express a curious mix of contrasting feelings. Some of the figures are typical worker-heroes, of the sort who featured in nineteenth-century

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<sup>35</sup> In the original plan, the wall of the writing room had to be decorated with a mosaic designed by Severini, while Rosso was commissioned to create mosaics for the public hall. By the end of 1940, Petrucci had decided to put Severini's mosaic in the atrium, and commissioned him and Rosso with, respectively, the mosaic for the façade of the building and a fresco for the writing room. Archivio Storico delle Ferrovie dello Stato (ASFFSS), Palazzo delle Poste di Alessandria, n. 4746.

<sup>36</sup> Archivio Storico INPS, Ufficio Reddito, 'Roma – via del Corso – p.za Augusto Imperatore', G 70, 72. Originally conceived as a cinema space (1936), it was rented to the bank in 1941.

<sup>37</sup> AGR, Drawings.

*Verismo sociale* (social realism) and were appropriated by fascist visual propaganda.<sup>38</sup> Others seem isolated, preoccupied with their individual activities and lacking any sense of the coordinated enterprise. These figures sometimes look at the observer in a reflective and melancholic mood (fig. 6.37). An alarming suspension seems to dominate the huge mural, like a presentiment of some drama about to take place. The seductive lure of Rosso's commercial decorations of the 1920s and 1930s was founded on the promise of full control and forthcoming enjoyment. By 1941, those promises seemed empty; the bombings that began in May 1940 and the negative outlook for military operations were evidence of 'the abyss that Fascism had opened up between words and reality'.<sup>39</sup> Rosso captured the general sentiments of his fellow citizens, the majority of whom felt at the mercy of events. By doing so, he contradicted the rules of decoration, defining the space of the bank through images that, instead of fixing an optimistic vision of the future, captured people's genuine uncertainties and fears for the times ahead (fig. 6.38). The BNL fresco marks a moment of crisis in Rosso's decorative practice; as the last section of this chapter will show, it was not the only one.

## 6.2 Leisure decoration: Rosso's *invitation au voyage*

In *Tender is the night*, Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) described a typical afternoon at the bar of the hotel Quirinale, in Rome. He wrote: 'there were five people in the Quirinale bar after dinner, a high-class Italian frail, who sat on a stool making persistent conversation against the bartender's bored: "Si ... Si ... Si," a light, snobbish Egyptian, who was lonely but chary of the woman, and the two Americans.'<sup>40</sup> The book was published in 1934, one year after Rosso finished his panel, *The dream of Rhea Silvia*, for one of the walls of the bar (fig. 6.39).<sup>41</sup> In telling the story of the vestal who, after being seduced by the god Mars while asleep, gave birth to Romulus and Remus, Rosso aimed to ennoble the space evoking the myth that narrated the origin of the divinity for whom the hill and hotel were dedicated (Romulus was also called *Quirinus*), while stripping the story of drama (the rape, and the consequent death of the vestal). Rosso downplayed

<sup>38</sup> Ginex, Giovanna, 'Il dibattito critico e istituzionale sul muralismo in Italia', in Vittorio Fagone, Giovanna Ginex, and Tulliola Sparagni (eds.), *Muri ai Pittori. Pittura murale e decorazione in Italia 1930–1950*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999), pp. 25–43.

<sup>39</sup> Duggan (2013), p. 337.

<sup>40</sup> Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the night*, first edn New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934, (London: Wordsworth, 2004), p. 187.

<sup>41</sup> 'Arredamenti moderni', *Domus*, 72 (1933), 666. The bar had been refurbished by Melchiorre Bega; the panel is not in situ anymore.

the overtly erotic iconography of the legend and focused on the dreaming figure of the woman, lying in a field by the river Tiber. Passions were controlled; the image invited the exclusive clientele of the hotel to leave reality behind, indulging their fantasies of '*lux, calme et volupté*'.<sup>42</sup>

As previously discussed, Rosso's decorative schemes for commercial venues such as cafes and restaurants glamorised the business or its main product or location, while indulging the customers' desire for escapism through an alternative dimension, either temporal or geographical. However, it was in leisure spaces that Rosso showed his ability to turn decoration into a catalyst for exotic fantasies. Notable examples of this approach include the schemes he produced for tourism-related spaces: ocean liners, the Lido Casino in Venice, and hotels and restaurants in Libya.<sup>43</sup> In these contexts, Rosso had to reflect the refined décor required by the cosmopolitan clientele described by Scott Fitzgerald, while also accommodating less refined customers – the phenomenon of mass tourism was emerging during those years. According to Gio Ponti, it was necessary to forge both national tourism with an educational function, and 'a foreign one, diverse from every other tourism for dignity and stature, and for the exceptional nature of the "visit to Italy"'.<sup>44</sup> Tourism was promoted by the fascist regime as a social activity that could be used to strengthen consensus in the lower classes. At the same time, the regime funded facilities for traditional elite and high-class travellers, who were a substantial income source, as well as a focus for nationalistic pride.<sup>45</sup>

The design of ocean liners, for instance, became a quintessential expression of national modern decoration, in Italy as well as abroad. Ponti considered them 'formidable ambassadors of the civilisation of the flag that they fly [...] They affirm what Italy has become, what Italy is today: bold, full of energy, adequate to the most cultivated people, educated to taste and able to match the most civilised and refined requirements of everyday life, mistress and teacher of techniques.'<sup>46</sup> They were also real *machines à habiter*, and thus an easy target for the debate on different tendencies in interior design.

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *L'Invitation au Voyage*, 1857.

<sup>43</sup> For the mosaics designed by Rosso for the Casino del Lido, see Antonio David Fiore, 'I pannelli di Giulio Rosso per il Casino del Lido di Venezia', in *Atti del XXI Colloquio AISCAM*, (Tivoli: Scripta Manent, 2016), pp. 173–182.

<sup>44</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Turismo in Italia', *Lo Stile*, 8 (1941), 2–3.

<sup>45</sup> Matteo Pretelli, 'Il fascismo e l'immagine dell'Italia all'estero', *Contemporanea*, 2 (2008), 221–242.

<sup>46</sup> Gio Ponti, 'Una nave', *Domus*, 3 (1933), 105–107.

In Italy, architect Gustavo Pulitzer Finali (1887–1967) was considered ‘the real innovator of the design of liners in the interwar period.’<sup>47</sup> He rejected the eclecticism that had dominated pre-war ship design in favour of a modern language characterised by clear lines, luxury materials, functional furniture, and elegant decorations. According to Edoardo Grosso, ‘it was Finali’s merit of having rejected the exhibition of pure art by accepting instead only those works that formed part of the interiors designed by him, and called exquisite artists to produce them.’<sup>48</sup> Rosso collaborated with Finali in the *Conte di Savoia*, launched in 1932; he was asked to design decorative schemes for the Princess’s Gallery, the first-class club-fumoir and writing room, and the tourist class club-fumoir.

A comparison of the club-fumoirs that Rosso designed for two different classes of passengers clearly reveals his audience-aware decorative strategy. In the first-class club-fumoir, the wall behind the bar counter and the low central dome with its six supporting columns were covered in translucent materials, including gold and silver leaf and various lacquers (fig. 6.40). Onto these surfaces, Rosso used transparent paint to create ‘nebulae, moons, and planets as in a planetarium of naïve fantasy [as well as] an ironic milky way with the symbols of the constellations.’ Malabotta, critic of *Casabella*, commented: ‘this is the most refined and precious space, particularly loved by the wealthy and cosmopolitan clientele.’<sup>49</sup> For the tourist class club-fumoir (fig. 6.41), Rosso created four narrative compositions representing scenes from life on board the ship: the landing, a vision of New York skyscrapers, and various leisure activities available during the cruise: art, cinema, food, drinks, music, all in the presence of glamorous women (figs. 6.42–6.44). These scenes projected the experiences and emotions of less wealthy, tourist-class travellers onto the walls, a place usually occupied by grand narratives of historical painting. Rosso invited these modern pilgrims to identify with his lively figures and to relish the status they had been able to reach. To those on the upper deck, accustomed to seeing themselves or their ancestors represented in commemorative paintings or murals, Rosso offered a different kind of experience. A shiny artificial sky, reminiscent of the preciousness of ancient medieval ceilings, encrusted with gold-leaf

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<sup>47</sup> Silvia Barisione, ‘La promozione delle compagnie di navigazione attraverso le triennali milanesi’, in Elisa Coppola et al. (eds.), *Six wonderful days – un invito al viaggio sulle grandi navi italiane*, (Genova: Tomena, 2002), p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Orlando Grosso, ‘Arte e decorazione navale, il “Conte di Savoia”’, *Emporium*, 456 (1932), 374–378.

<sup>49</sup> Manlio Malabotta, ‘Gustavo Pulitzer Finali arredatore di navi’, *Casabella*, 2 (1933), 23.



stars, was accompanied with the verses of the first *stanza* of Lorenzo de Medici's poem *Quant'è bella giovinezza*, an evident hymn to escapism and enjoyment of life's pleasures. A glamorously elegant, light-hearted, and precious effect that expressed perfectly 'the surface glitter and hedonistic tastes' of the context.<sup>50</sup>

In the colonial context of Libya, Rosso's attempt to visualise the multifarious escapist fantasies of his contemporaries reveals the extent to which the fascist regime exploited these for its own imperialist project. After the conquest of Ethiopia, 'colonial tourism [...] was required to demonstrate the strength of the fascist empire in Africa to an international audience.'<sup>51</sup> The legitimacy of Italy's claim to a colonial empire was expressed through technological and organisational efficiency. The colonial government of Italo Balbo (1934–1940) constituted the Ente per il Turismo Alberghiero in Libia (ETAL) (Office for Libyan Tourism) and promoted a campaign of infrastructure construction throughout the colony to support the tourist industry. The eighteen hotels, casino, theatre, and other amenities and facilities directly managed by the ETAL had to be 'perfectly responsive to the necessity of tourism and to the modern demand of travellers.'<sup>52</sup> Between the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938, Rosso was invited by the ETAL to design decorative schemes for the Office headquarters (discussed in Chapter 5), as well as a bar, the Turkish baths, and the restaurant of two hotels in Tripoli.

Rosso's scheme aimed to fulfil requirements for 'an opulent but conventionally appropriate context', as well as satisfying his clientele's search for exoticism within the comfortable structures provided by fascist colonialism.<sup>53</sup> As the *Libia* guide edited by the Touring Club Italiano in 1937 declares, 'Libya has kept its Oriental fascination more than any other region of the Mediterranean Africa', and 'the faith that Italians inspire in the locals allows tourists to get closer to their lives'.<sup>54</sup> Tourists were attracted by the offer of an authentic experience of the indigenous culture, but their experience was constantly mediated by the structures of the colonial organisation. McLaren interprets di Fausto's tourist architecture in Libya as a revival of local architecture that aimed to

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<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton, 'The Style and the Age', in Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, and Ghislaine Wood (eds.), *Art Deco 1910–1939*, (London: V&A Publications, 2003), p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> Brian L. McLaren, *Architecture and Tourism in Italian Colonial Libya*, (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> L. V. Bertarelli, *Libia*, (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1937), p. 136.

satisfy tourist expectations by providing comfortable spaces with a flavour of authenticity. Rosso's decorative schemes complemented this aim by offering images of the Libyan people, another object of tourist curiosity. His schemes thus participated in the same ambivalent effort to both segregate and preserve the indigenous culture that characterised the politics of the colonial regime.

On the wall behind the counter of the hotel Mehari bar (architect Florestano di Fausto, 1937), Rosso frescoed a group of Libyans sitting around a woman pouring mint tea into glasses (fig. 6.45). The focus of the composition was the ceremonial preparation of tea, an act that was performed when locals received guests into their houses. It offered Rosso a way to use a large composition to translate some of the images he had captured in the numerous sketches produced during his stay and now kept in his archive in Sao Paulo (fig. 6.46). Similar genre scenes were used for the floor mosaic in the baths of the Uaddan Hotel, the only exclusively first-class hotel in the colony.<sup>55</sup> Inspired by the presence of a hexagonal fountain in the middle of the rectangular space, Rosso invented a composition that had two main scenes on the larger sides, and two smaller and identical scenes on the shorter sides (fig. 6.47). The former were inspired by the theme of water: the first showed local women at a well, surrounded by gazelles and palms; the second presented two men fishing on a sailboat surrounded by fishes of all types. The repeated smaller image depicted two pairs of gazelles flanking a yucca plant.

In both cases, Rosso's scenes were 'mounted' in the space as visual details in the prevailing unadorned architecture. The Mehari fresco was inserted into the niche of the bar: it opened like a window towards the exterior, literally marking the limit between the ordered and controllable inside, and the exotic outside – although showing in the latter case a domestic and ordinary moment. The Uaddan mosaics brought images of local people into the hotel, while confirming, at the same time, their status as subalterns and stereotypes about their indolence and lack of interest in technological progress. The black and white tesserae used to design figurative scenes also marked the known relationship of derivation of the Turkish baths from Roman models; in fact, in advertising materials of the time, they were called Roman Baths (fig. 6.48).<sup>56</sup> The scenes drew on

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<sup>55</sup> Recent Internet pictures show the mosaics intact.

<sup>56</sup> I am using the definition of 'Turkish Bath' that Rosso himself used in his correspondence with Umberto Baldini, Director of the Spilimbergo Mosaic School, which made and installed the mosaics. ASSM, 'Bianco-nero ETAL (Rosso)', b. 71, fasc. 127.

‘the spectacle of difference’ that characterised the Western modern practice of tourism, while re-enacting the separation between the two contexts.<sup>57</sup> These terms were made even more explicit in a series of tempera paintings that Rosso made during his stay (probably as postcards for the ETAL). Modern hotels and groups of local people in characteristic clothes were literally overlapping; sometimes with the addition of archaeological artefacts (fig. 6.49). They were offered to the gaze of the tourist as distinct kinds of attractions, coexisting but not relating to each other: one was the accommodation for Western tourists provided by a Western colonial power; the others were their objects of curiosity.

However, in another ETAL building in Libya, Rosso adopted a different approach, revealing one of those discontinuities that make his output particularly compelling. For the Mehari Hotel restaurant, Rosso decorated the walls between the windows with *Scenes of the Tripoli of the Corsairs* (figs. 6.50–6.54). The location of the restaurant, on a detached semi-circular platform facing the sea, and the peculiarity of its being accessible from the hotel only through an underground passageway, must have suggested the theme to Rosso. In lively scenes of corsairs assaulting galleons, attacking castles and ships, and kidnapping girls, he reinterpreted aspects of local history. With respect to similar works, such as the panels for the café San Pietro in Bologna, nostalgia was replaced with a revived sense of humour. Indeed, there was no visual reference to Tripoli; the focus was on the actions of the pirates, who, far from being scary outlaws or romantic anti-heroes, were sketched by Rosso as meaty fellows, wearing picturesque and varied clothes. The reference to the buccaneers certainly drew on the narrative of the state of anarchy that had characterised the region under the Ottoman Empire, justifying the Italian war of conquest in 1911–12. However, any imperialistic undertone was wiped out by what looked like a comic, over-the-top pantomime. Although, by this time, Rosso had already appropriated the stylistic elements of the Scuola Romana, here he once again impersonated the ‘pupazzettista’, the brilliant inventor of small, whimsical decorative vignettes. One explanation for this stylistic choice may have been the fact that the ‘magnificent sea restaurant’ was considered ‘especially apt for passing tourists and parties.’<sup>58</sup> Thus, a less exclusive audience allowed Rosso to design

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<sup>57</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Avant-garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 62.

<sup>58</sup> Giovanni de Agostini, *La Libia Turistica*, (Milan: De Agostini, 1938), p. 69.

something that, while still resonating with his usual references (location, and typology of space), was more akin to his own taste for leisure decoration: engaging, funny, and irredeemably naïve.

The amusing style used in the Mehari restaurant scheme highlighted the leisure function of the space, while downplaying the references to dominion and control that characterised the other ETAL structures. Such deviations were not unique in Rosso's output. The above-mentioned BNL fresco was another decorative scheme whose style and theme did not comply with the promotional expectations inherent in commercial decoration. These examples show how, sometimes, despite using themes that suited his patrons' representational requirements (the anarchic state of Libya under pirate rule; human labour), Rosso did not respond to the brief in the expected way. The themes had to be adapted each time and Rosso usually complied effectively. However, by taking advantage of situations in which he had more creative leeway, he actively engaged with the spaces, giving them an unexpected character. Another compelling example is his scheme for the entrance hall of the Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale (INFPS, the national institute responsible for pensions and welfare) along via di Ripetta in Rome (part of the same BNL complex). In this case, a space that should have featured fascist propaganda images (like those investigated in the next chapter) was transformed into a place of fantastic escapism.

As the building hosting the BNL, the INPS block (referred to as 'B' in the original plans) was finished in 1941 as part of a project to make visible the ruins of the mausoleum of Augustus.<sup>59</sup> The section of block B to which the hall allowed access had no commercial or leisure function; when Rosso was commissioned by Ballio Morpurgo (in August 1939) to decorate this space, it was not known which offices would end up there.<sup>60</sup> These circumstances allowed Rosso a certain freedom of approach. The hall was ambiguously in-between: within the building and yet freely accessible, through a large arch, from the street (fig. 6.55). It must be noted that the mission of the INFPS had been already expressed in a 40 meter sculptural frieze by Alfredo Biagini, situated along the balcony of block A. The necessary references to Rome and Fascism were also included in

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<sup>59</sup> The hall allowed entrance to Section B3. Archivio Storico INPS, Ufficio Reddito 'Zona Augustea'.

<sup>60</sup> AGR, Documents, INFPS, Servizio Tecnico, 'Decorazione pittorica in affresco androne edificio B3 zona Augustea', 13/07/1939.

Ferruccio Ferrazzi's mosaics, and the inscriptions and the sculptures on the façade of block B respectively. As the key spaces were accounted for, the interiors were left free for interventions that were less restricted, although they still featured subjects favoured by the regime.<sup>61</sup> Rosso's scheme was the only one open to the public that did not conform to conventional fascist propaganda. Located at the junction between via di Ripetta and piazza Augusto, it was the last thing viewers coming from piazza del Popolo would notice before finding themselves within the last of the urban spaces completely transformed by the regime in the historical centre of the Capital. This experience was, I believe, the element that Rosso's frescos responded to, identifying passers-by as his intended audience.

Rosso used solutions that were typical of decorative schemes in which he aimed to celebrate locations. He evoked the *genius loci*, the spirit of the city, which he identified with the corners, inhabitants, and customs of late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth century Rome. Such imagery did not conform to the repertoire advocated by the fascist regime as an effective vehicle of national identity. Diane Ghirardo has explained that the regime favoured 'eliminating the traces of intervening centuries', when restoring and reconstructing buildings and areas, in order to focus on the Roman, medieval, and Renaissance past.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Rosso had used such 'picturesque' imagery mainly before the mid-1930s and always in private enterprises.

In the rectangular space, covered by a low pavilion vault, he represented three scenes of Roman life set in iconic settings. On the right-hand side, Rosso depicted preparations for the *Corsa dei barberi*, an annual race of riderless horses along via del Corso, from piazza del Popolo to piazza Venezia (fig. 6.56); on the left, a coach passed through piazza di Spagna (fig. 6.57); in the foreground of the central image, a seated fisherman smoked a pipe, looking at the observer, while turning his back on the busy Ripetta river harbour (fig. 6.58). The main reference for the work was illustrated on the ceiling, where Rosso depicted a pile of paper with drawings of classical and medieval ruins of Rome (fig. 6.59). These drawings were reproductions of etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–

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<sup>61</sup> Pippo Rizzo (1897–1964) designed frescos representing sports; Antonio Barrera (1889–1970) composed two views, one representing the Mausoleum of Augustus in Roman times, and the other the Soderini gardens (sec. XVI).

<sup>62</sup> Diane Ghirardo, 'City and Theatre: The Rhetoric of Fascist Architecture', *Stanford Italian Review*, 1–2 (1989), 184 and 165–193. See also the 'Middle Ages and Renaissance' part of Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (eds.), *Donatello among the Blackshirts*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

1778). The artist revisited the genre of souvenir views of the city with dramatic and boldly lit dynamic compositions. Rosso, who also quoted from Piranesi in the background of his Ripetta harbour scene (fig. 6.60), added genre scenes modelled on those by Luigi Rossini (1790–1857) and Bartolomeo Pinelli (1781–1835), artists who came after Piranesi and created picturesque images of Rome during the Restoration period.<sup>63</sup>

It is important to highlight that Rosso represented features of Piranesi, Rossini, and Pinelli's Rome that had been lost meanwhile. The *Corsa dei Berberi* and Ripetta harbour were memories of a pre-*Risorgimento* Rome: in 1874, the race was abolished because it caused so much turmoil. The harbour had been destroyed at the beginning of the twentieth century to make way for river embankments that protected the Capital from flooding. Gone also were the Augusteo theatre (built on top of the ruins of Augustus' Mausoleum), the tangle of alleys surrounding it, and the people who inhabited them. Like the *vedutisti*, Rosso addressed his compositions to strangers, but those of a different kind: everybody, even the Romans, were strangers in this new space, piazza Augusto Imperatore. Rosso reminded his audience of what had disappeared, just as he had done in Bologna's Café San Pietro. There, however, the nostalgic visions were affixed to a building belonging to the body that had supervised the destruction, not to an historical café that was part of a picturesque city centre. The protagonists of the frescos were neither the mighty Romans who built the mausoleum, nor the fascist engineers who brought its ruins to light: they were the ancestors of the 'disenfranchised populace' forced to move to the suburbs after their houses were demolished. This group of citizens was embodied by the idle fisherman who dominated the central scene, looking straight at the viewer, and placed ambiguously at the threshold between the real space of the atrium and the fictional one represented on its walls.<sup>64</sup> The lineage and heritage bestowed by Rosso on the fascist piazza Augusto was suspicious, and even potentially seditious. The *Corsa*, one of the highlights of the Roman leg of the Grand Tour, was a favourite place for local souvenir artists. It also became a recurrent theme for the artists of the Scuola Romana, who used it to represent humanity in turmoil, unable to control events and overwhelmed by them. A large mural, painted in tempera

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<sup>63</sup> Lucia Cavazzi and Maria Luisa Tittoni (eds.), *Luigi Rossini Incisore. Vedute di Roma 1817–1850*, (Rome: Multigrafica, 1982).

<sup>64</sup> Lasansky (2004), p. 6.

by Corrado Cagli in 1936 for the Opera Nazionale Balilla of Castel de' Cisari in Rome, was obliterated by order of the Ministry of Education for 'inadequacy of the theme.'<sup>65</sup>

The semantic ambiguity of Rosso's scheme was matched by an equally ambiguous spatial construction. The presence of steps invited the observer to enter the space of the fresco, blurring the border between decoration and architecture. At the same time, the scenes were framed with pairs of spiral columns supporting posts on which pieces of fabric, like curtains, were suspended; these gave the impression of temporary stages, set up for a popular show. The illusion was simultaneously conjured up and revealed. The neutral background, the absence of any physical separation between the fictitious stages, and the symmetrical, composite profile provided by the keystone of the entrance arch – giving the impression that the walls were covered by a canvas that folded away from the wall at that point – re-established the superficial nature of the scheme. The INFPS frescos presented a dynamic and engaging relationship with architecture. Rosso appeared to challenge a fundamental law of architectural decoration: that the flatness of a wall had to be respected. Yet, on closer inspection, even this apparent act of rebellion against the dominance of architecture was revealed to be an illusion: Rosso painted trompe l'oeil scenes on the walls that, in turn, pretended to be painted on fabric attached to the wall.

By playing with the illusionistic nature of decoration, Rosso seemed almost to be giving a demonstration or presenting an essay on the mechanisms of deception and escapism that he had used in promotional schemes to enhance products and producers, locations and purveyors. At the same time, the picturesque atmospheres, past times, and lost places in the INFPS entrance established a difficult relationship with the institution they were supposed to represent (and legitimise). The INFPS had financed the 'healing pickaxe' that had destroyed the heritage celebrated in the frescos; it had actively implemented what Paul Baxa interprets as a deliberate policy, whose 'effect was to disrupt the memory of the Romans, make what was once familiar strange'.<sup>66</sup> Rosso's fresco points in the opposite direction, re-signifying the anonymous space as a threshold for the imagination, a way to escape from the estranged space of piazza Augusto

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<sup>65</sup> <http://www.archiviocagli.com/corrado-cagli/biografia-di-corrado-cagli/> [accessed 17/01/2017].

<sup>66</sup> Paul Baxa, *Roads and ruins: the symbolic landscape of fascist Rome*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 59, 64.

Imperatore, and the wider reality it stood for. One wonders whether this dream of a Rome that no longer existed, populated by an idle, carefree, and playful populace, was the other face of the worried and pessimistic vision of humanity expressed a few hundred meters away, at almost the same time, in the BNL mural.

## Conclusion

I have grouped together Rosso's decorative schemes for spaces dedicated to commerce and leisure because of their common 'deceptive' aim. Rosso relied on his audience members' inclination to marvel at his creations to convince them to buy a product, use a service, or feel excitement at the spectacle of an exotic touristic destination. If, as Barry Curtis and Claire Pajackowska have argued, 'space perception is fundamentally motivated by anxiety and desire', Rosso's decorative schemes supplied observers with an illusory sense of fulfilment. He used the past, future, myths, other places, and various styles and registers, to exploit what the above-mentioned authors describe as the 'immaterial aspirations, memories, and connections with bodies of knowledge' that characterise the relationship between cities and their inhabitants.<sup>67</sup> Yet, as Robert Green has observed, seduction is 'about power and manipulation as much as it is about romance, about how to make someone fall under your spell.'<sup>68</sup> Scholars of political communication have pointed out that, 'at the beginning of the twentieth century [the word] propaganda was predominantly used as a synonym for advertising in the commercial sphere'; in Italy, it still is.<sup>69</sup> The boundaries between commercial promotion and ideological propaganda, in particular that of Fascism, were extremely permeable: the latter used themes and solutions borrowed from the former.<sup>70</sup>

In constructing its myth of the state, Fascism promoted an ideological interpretation of the past and national heritage; to win the support of the masses, it presented itself as an agent of modernisation and protector of traditions, animated by an anti-bourgeois spirit. It defined its own identity by establishing an oppositional relationship with the

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<sup>67</sup> Curtis, Barry and Pajackowska, Claire, 'Location Envy', in David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There, Elsewhere*, (London: Open Editions, 2002), pp. 24, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Emma Brady, 'The Art of Seduction', *The Birmingham Post*, 21/04/2004.  
<https://www.questia.com/article/1G1-115614057/the-art-of-seduction-finding-the-man-or-woman-of>  
[accessed 21/01/2017]

<sup>69</sup> Thymian Bussemer, 'Propaganda', in Lynda Lee Kaid, Christina Holtz-Bacha (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Political Communication*, 2 vols. (London: SAGE, 2008), I, p. 658.

<sup>70</sup> See: Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e Politica dell'Immagine*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988), and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).



foreign, the stranger, and the alien. The themes selected to communicate these elements of Fascism's discourse were borrowed from previous experience. Indeed, the use of the past for political purposes was a practice that had constantly recurred in the history of humanity. Mythology was part of the usual repertoire of decorators. Themes related to technology had entered Italian art thanks to Futurism; in relation to labour, such themes had emerged even earlier, with the *Verismo* and *Simbolismo* of the second half of the 1800s. However, once appropriated by Fascism, these themes necessitated a process of selection and adaptation: not all versions of the past were suitable for ideological propaganda; not all fantasies could be recommended under a totalitarian regime.

Among the decorative schemes presented in this chapter, those for the Bank of Albania and ETAL represent liminal situations. These spaces dedicated to leisure and commerce, commissioned by bodies that were expressions of the regime, offered themselves to a form of visual propaganda that celebrated human effort and provided a glamorous setting for a luxury tourist experience, while also engaging with the narrative of the regime's dominion. Rosso translated the representative needs of the regime using monumental scenes, the relationship between compositional elements, and technique. However, in some cases, Rosso deviated from this process of adaptation; some spaces, such as the Mehari restaurant and the INFPS entrance in via Ripetta, featured imagery that was extraneous to the visual discourse of Fascism. Rosso resorted to elements of frivolity and theatricality that were typical of his schemes for private domestic, commercial, and leisure contexts. The seductive power of his art was confirmed, although it lured the audience towards unexpected ends.

## 7. The decorator as a designer of propaganda

*'As we write, new directives are spreading. Now they say that the arts – as always in all civilizations on the rise – should serve the people; they must be useful to society. But it is up to posterity to speak of the possible developments of this trend...'*<sup>1</sup>

Hitherto, I have considered Rosso's creative response to spaces commissioned by a predominantly private patronage: individuals, companies, and corporations. In the case of commissions from public bodies, notably the ETAL and INFPS (Chapter 6), the Ministry of Corporations and Home Office (Chapter 5) and, above all, the ENAPI (Chapter 4), Rosso's designs participated in the fascist ideological discourse (or, occasionally, as in the case of INFPS, contradicted this discourse). However, in all of these cases, Rosso's response to Fascism's propagandistic pressures was part of a more complex set of problems, from meeting new audiences' expectations in terms of escapism and the exotic, to visualizing identity, status and authority, and modernising Italian applied arts while being at the same time, faithful to tradition. In this chapter, I analyse how Rosso's decorative schemes commissioned by the regime responded to the new directives highlighted by Vincenzo Costantini above. These designs resulted from Fascism's 'politics of the image,' defined as 'the reciprocal action of legitimisation between Fascism and culture.'<sup>2</sup> Designed for spaces intended as backdrops for meetings, rallies, and mass spectacles, these schemes aimed to present an effective and meaningful image of Fascism. Drawing on interpretations of the latter as a fluid ideology that used rhetorical discourse as an instrument of identity self-construction, I consider Rosso's schemes a visual version of this formative discourse.

In the last twenty years, scholars from disciplines including history and sociology have advanced different interpretations of Fascism, among which those highlighting its ritual and aesthetic/discursive nature particularly resonate with my analysis. The former, conceptualised by Emilio Gentile, interprets Fascism as a form of 'totalitarian *Cesarismo*', a fundamentally ritualised political phenomenon revolving around the cult

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<sup>1</sup> Vincenzo Costantini, *Pittura Italiana Contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Ottocento ad Oggi*, (Milan: Hoepli, 1934), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e Politica dell'Immagine*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988), pp. 24, 35.

of Mussolini as the *Duce*.<sup>3</sup> The latter, first formulated by Barbara Spackman, considers Fascism a 'discursive formation' (informed by virility, in particular).<sup>4</sup> According to this interpretation, Fascism developed its self-definition through 'aesthetic overproduction'.<sup>5</sup> As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi has observed, discourse – non-linguistic forms such as ritual, myths, and images in particular – is the essential element in the formation of the fascist identity.<sup>6</sup> These interpretative frameworks are indebted to Walter Benjamin's afterword to his essay, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935–1939). According to Benjamin, Fascism used aesthetics in order to provide itself with an 'aureatic' appearance. In so doing, it aimed to control the masses, distracting them from realising their subaltern position in society and driving them towards the inevitable outcome: imperialist war. The 'aesthetisation of politics corresponded with the politicisation of aesthetics typical of socialist regimes.<sup>7</sup> In fact, both practices coexisted within Fascism.<sup>8</sup> Susan Marla Stone, drawing on Antonio Gramsci's reflection on the strategies of the regime's hegemonic project, has pointed out how, by politicising aesthetics, Fascism put the arts under its control. The arts then transmitted, interpreted, magnified, and made accessible to the masses the mythic and ritual content of aesthetic politics as formulated by Mussolini, building a consensus.<sup>9</sup> This mediating role gave intellectuals conflicting power: in addition to becoming instruments of ideological propaganda, they were asked to give substance to the 'spectacle of Fascism's newly constructed symbolic world,' thus participating in the process of constructing its identity.<sup>10</sup>

In the next sections, I will first describe the bureaucratic system set up by the regime to enlist and control artists, and the way in which Rosso responded to it. I will then analyse his proposal for a fascist public art and his contribution to the seminal event of Italian Muralism, the 1933 Triennale of Milan. Finally, I will investigate Rosso's interpretation

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<sup>3</sup> Emilio Gentile, *La via Italiana al totalitarismo*, (Rome: Carocci, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. IX, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism. 18 BL and the theater of masses for masses*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 3, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, first published in 1935/36, (Turin: Einaudi, 1998, trans. Enrico Filippini), pp. 36–39.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Anno X – La Mostra dell Rivoluzione Fascista del 1932*, (Pisa-Roma, IEPI, 2003), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Marla Stone, *The Patron State*, (Princeton: University Press, 1998); Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, (Bari: Laterza, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Falasca-Zamponi (2000), p. 90.

of and participation in Fascism's mythic discourse, highlighting its changing qualities. Rosso's decorative output will be assessed as a response to the diverse temporal dimensions underpinning Fascism's architectural expressions: the (temporary) propagandistic exhibitions and the (eternal) monument. In analysing Rosso's 'fascist' works, I will highlight how he tackled recurrent concepts in the narrative of Fascism – above all, *romanità*, *italianità*, modern classicism, and the projection of tradition towards the future. I will also explore the relationship between the elements of his visual discourse and the verbal/literary rhetoric of the regime. Unlike Rosso's occasional encounters with his private patrons, which allowed him to fix a particular identity in a particular time and to promote particular commodities, Fascism's identity evolved fluidly in accordance with Mussolini's changing political agenda. The usual process of negotiating the decoration of a space was carried out on increasingly slippery and unstable ground. There was room for experimentation, disappointment, conventionalism, conformism, and doubt. Rosso's worst decorative art, as well as some of his best, was produced as a result.

### 7.1 Fascism and art: from bureaucracy to patronage, through aesthetic pluralism

Between 1922 and 1926, Mussolini's power grew to the point of establishing a dictatorship, and the fascist party began to penetrate every sphere of government. Although Fascism did not begin to play a dominant role in the arts until the beginning of the 1930s, the regime considered it a priority to control culture. Intervening at the opening of the show *Sette Pittori del Novecento* (Milan, Galleria Pesaro) on 15 February 1923 (four months after becoming Prime Minister), Mussolini declared that the government had a duty to consider the role of artists and the arts.<sup>11</sup> A lesser-known speech, given on 20 May 1924 at a conference of Italian artistic associations gathered in Rome, anticipated some of the elements of this approach. Mussolini rejected elitist, intellectually-complicated, and market-driven forms of artistic expression, favouring art that would put the regime 'in contact with the masses'.<sup>12</sup> The arts were valued for their ability to inspire people through legends and stories from history, as well as for having culturally unified the country throughout centuries of political division and foreign

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<sup>11</sup> Vittorio Fagone, *L'Arte all'Ordine del Giorno*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Rossana Bossaglia, *Il Novecento Italiano*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), p. 19.

dominion: the communicative, cult-like, and nationalistic role that the arts would assume under governmental patronage had found its early expression.

At the end of the 1920s, the party carried out a programme of 'bureaucratic overhaul and restructuring' to take control of the pre-existing cultural institutions, found new ones where necessary, and set up a centralised organisational structure to enlist artists and regulate their activities.<sup>13</sup> This process had some ambiguities and uncertainties. Mussolini's presence at the opening of the *Novecento Italiano* exhibition (Milan, Permanente, 15 February 1926), organised (like the one in 1922) by art critic Margherita Sarfatti, initially suggested that he backed her plan to turn the Novecento into a national artistic movement, solely responsible for all of the functions that the regime wanted the arts to undertake.<sup>14</sup> Yet, by the end of the decade, Sarfatti's plan was thwarted by the initiative of Cipriano Efisio Oppo and Antonio Maraini, the cultural 'impresario/bureaucrats' of the regime, as Stone calls them.<sup>15</sup> Acting within the party, and taking advantage of their influential roles as president and secretary of the *Sindacato Fascista degli Artisti* (Fascist Union of Artists) and secretary of the Roman Quadriennale and Venice Biennale respectively, they set up a system that would frame the activities of Italian artists thereafter.<sup>16</sup> In this process, a key role was played by Giuseppe Bottai (1895–1959), who believed that 'the Fascist State does not create an aesthetic, but demands the active presence of the artists in the structure of the national energies.'<sup>17</sup> As Undersecretary and Minister of Corporations (1926–29 and 1929–32), Bottai enforced the union structures that regimented artists within the *Professionisti ed Artisti* (freelancers and artists) Corporation. Thus, rather than endorsing an official

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<sup>13</sup> Stone (1998), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Fabio Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), pp. 81–87.

<sup>15</sup> Stone (1998), p. 55. For more on Oppo as an impresario/bureaucrat see: Francesca Romana Morelli (ed.), *Cipriano Efisio Oppo – UN legislatore per l'arte*, (Roma: De Luca, 2000); on Maraini as an impresario/bureaucrat see: Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte, le Biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928–1942)*, (Udine: Forum, 2006) and Antonio Maraini, *L'Ordinamento Sindacale Fascista delle Belle Arti: raccolta di leggi e dati*, (Roma: Sindacato Nazionale Fascista Belle Arti, 1939).

<sup>16</sup> Oppo was president of the Fascist Union of Artists between 1927 and 1932 (when he was replaced by Maraini). From 1929, he was President of the Roman Quadriennale, and also responsible for the exhibitions organised by the fascist party at the Circo Massimo, Rome. Maraini became Secretary of the Venice Biennale in 1927. See Stone (1998), pp. 57–58.

<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, *Fronte dell'Arte*, (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1943), p. 86. From 1936, as Minister for National Education, Bottai continued to support cultural pluralism. An Office for Contemporary Art was created in 1940; in 1942, the so-called '2% Law' allocated 2% of the funding earmarked for new public buildings to decorative interventions. See Giuseppe Bottai, 'Inchiesta sulla legge del 2%', *Primato*, 8 (1942), 1. On Bottai and his role in the politics of the arts see: Alessandro Masi (ed.), *La politica delle arti: scritti 1918–1943*, (Roma: Editalia, 1992).

government style, the regime instituted a centralised and hierarchical system of bureaucratic control. As Francesco Saponi has described, 'the State must encourage the creation of new styles, not only in deference to the past, but in homage to an idea of history to be imposed in the present age.'<sup>18</sup> The result was an 'aesthetic pluralism', i.e. 'the practice of accepting and supporting a range of aesthetics', successfully used as a bargaining chip to encourage artists to join the fascist union system.<sup>19</sup> This solution enabled the party to penetrate the lives of all categories of citizens, regardless of class, status, and gender. Following the 'move towards the people' announced by Mussolini in a speech given in Naples in autumn 1931, all forms of communications, high and low, traditional and modern, were mobilised.<sup>20</sup>

Membership of the Fascist Union of Artists allowed direct access to the exhibition system reformed by Oppo and Maraini. It consisted of a hierarchical structure that linked local offices with the central corporate authority. Provincial branches organised regular regional and inter-provincial exhibitions. Success and visibility at these events helped an artist to secure a place at the national Quadriennale held in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. Artists who attracted positive remarks from critics and the support of public patrons could hope for an invitation to the Venice Biennale, which had been reimagined as an international stage for the Italian arts (including cinema, music, and theatre). For decorators and architects, the Milanese Triennale offered the most prestigious display spaces. There were other opportunities to exhibit at international shows organised with support from the Union, in which artists could participate only through invitation. With the opening of the Quadriennale in 1931, and the earlier restructuring of the Venice Biennale (1928) and Milanese Triennale (1930) as autonomous bodies under the control of the central government, the fascist art system was established.<sup>21</sup> After this first phase of bureaucratic overhaul, a second phase followed, in which the regime took direct action in the cultural sphere through competitions, awards, purchases, and commissions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Francesco Saponi, *L'Arte e il Duce*, (Milan: Mondadori, 1932), p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> Stone (1998), pp. 5–6, 65–70. Vittorio Fagone had used the expression, 'pluralism of artistic expressions' to define the same approach. See Vittorio Fagone, 'Arte, politica e propaganda', in Barilli Renato et al. (eds.), *Gli Anni Trenta. Arte e cultura in Italia*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1983), p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> Saponi (1932), pp. 169–183.

<sup>22</sup> Stone (1998), p. 20.

From 1931 onwards, Rosso is consistently documented as a participant in local and national exhibitions; his *Sindacato* membership number was 151571.<sup>23</sup> His easel paintings and drawings were displayed at five exhibitions of the Fascist Union of Artists of the Lazio region (1932, 1934, 1936, 1937, and 1942),<sup>24</sup> four Roman Quadriennales (1931, 1935, 1939, and 1943),<sup>25</sup> and at the 1936 Venice Biennale.<sup>26</sup> Just in itself, this involvement is extremely interesting: since the beginning of his career, Rosso had rejected the practice of easel painting, devoting himself solely to decoration. Besides, apart from the *Pensionato* final show, he never exhibited paintings in any solo or group show in a private gallery until 1944.<sup>27</sup> How can we account for his participation in shows organised by the Fascist Union, particularly given that they were held just as the artistic climate was warming towards his own field of expertise, i.e. mural decoration?

As previously discussed, by the beginning of the 1930s, Rosso was considered an established 'modern' decorator, particularly sought after by a private and commercial clientele and with strong collaborative links to architects in Rome and Milan. However, the consequences of the post-1929 financial crash were felt also in Italy, affecting the

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Rosso to the committee judging submissions to the E42 Congress Hall mosaic competition, 27/06/1940. ACS, E42, Servizi Artistici, b. 957, fasc. 9468.

<sup>24</sup> In 1932, Rosso exhibited *Ricamatrici* [*Terza Mostra del Sindacato Regionale Fascista Belle Arti del Lazio* (Rome: Pinci, 1932), p. 37]; in 1934 he provided the designs for the ENAPI section of the show (AGR, press clippings, Piero Scarpa, 'Pittori, scultori e decoratori del Lazio', *Il Messaggero*, 28/04/1934); in 1936, he presented the canvas *Giuochi* [*Sesta Mostra del Sindacato Fascista Belle Arti del Lazio, febbraio-marzo 1936*, (Rome: Pinci, 1936), p. 47]; in 1937, Rosso exhibited two *Composizioni* [*Settima Mostra del Sindacato Fascista Belle Arti del Lazio, aprile-giugno 1937*, (Rome: Pinci, 1937), p. 61, nn. 14, 18, tab. VI]; in 1942, two canvas entitled *Gli amici* and *Sala Convegno*, and some drawings [*Decima Mostra del Sindacato Fascista Belle Arti del Lazio, maggio-giugno 1942*, (Rome: Palazzotti e Coppitelli, 1942), p. 47, nn. 16 and 17; p. 49, nn. 9 and 11; Attilio Crespi, 'La X Mostra del Sindacato Interprovinciale del Lazio', *Emporium*, 571 (1942), 317–320].

<sup>25</sup> In 1931, Rosso displayed the oil painting, *Corridori*, (room XXI) and five preparatory drawings in the black and white gallery [*Prima Quadriennale d'Arte Nazionale*, (Rome: Enzo Pinci, 1931), pp. 108 and 174; tab. XI]; In 1935, he exhibited the oil painting, *La rissa*, in room LVIII [*Seconda Quadriennale d'Arte Nazionale*, (Rome: Tumminelli, 1935), p. 203]; In 1939, he exhibited the oil painting, *Composizione*, in room LV [*Terza Quadriennale d'Arte Nazionale*, (Rome: Domus, 1939), p. 237; Archivio Storico della Quadriennale di Roma, fasc. Seconda Quadriennale, Rassegna Stampa, Guido Ruberti, 'Poesia e pittura costruttiva alla III Quadriennale', *Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 09/03/1939; in 1943, he showed three oil paintings: *Modello e pittore*, *Ritratto* and *Spogliatoio* in room IV [*Quarta Quadriennale d'Arte Nazionale*, (Rome: Mediterranea, 1943), p. 38].

<sup>26</sup> Rosso exhibited two tempera paintings in room 16: *Via Crucis* and *Stazione della via Crucis*, in *Ventesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*, (Venice: Ferrari, 1936), pp. 71–72.

<sup>27</sup> AGR, press clippings, Corrado Pavolini 'I quattro del Pensionato Artistico', *Il Tevere*, 28/12/1928; C.E. Oppo 'I saggi del Pensionato Nazionale', *La Tribuna*, 28/12/1929. In 1944, Rosso exhibited in the La Campana gallery, Rome. AGR, press clippings, V., 'Giulio Rosso alla "Campana"'. The year of the show can be deduced thanks to a mention of the exhibition that preceded Rosso's: Giovanni Omiccioli (1901–1975) exhibited in the gallery in 1944. In 1941, Rosso exhibited posters designed for EIAR radio shows at the La Colonna gallery in Rome. AGR, press clippings, Attilio Crespi, 'I disegni di Giulio Rosso', *Radiocorriere*, 02/08/1941

high-bourgeois patrons who had guaranteed his success during the previous decade.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the activism of state patronage, reflected in the resources that the regime pumped into the design of the 1932 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (MRF, to be discussed in the next section) and in the new resources offered through national exhibitions, hinted at fresh possibilities for employment within the artistic programmes of the regime. I believe that this shift in the dynamics of patronage was instrumental in encouraging Rosso to submit paintings to the union exhibitions; this was a necessary step toward gaining access to public commissions.

The move turned out to be worth taking. Although Rosso did not participate in the MRF, probably because he had previously barely engaged with fascist propaganda, between 1933 and 1938, Rosso was employed by different governmental bodies (the Ministry of Communications; the ENAPI; the ETAL; the INFPS). Besides, as I will discuss in the next sections, Rosso collaborated in the design of three major propagandistic exhibitions: the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* (Rome, 1937), the *Mostra Autarchica del Minerale* (Italian Autarchic Mineral Exhibition; Rome, 1938) and the *Mostra Triennale delle Terre d'Oltremare* in Naples (1940). He participated in some national competitions to decorate major public buildings; in the majority of cases, he was appointed directly.<sup>29</sup> From the La Sapienza University Campus, to the Foro Mussolini, Ostiense railway station, E42 in Rome, and the Milanese Palazzo di Giustizia, Rosso was involved in virtually all the regime's major architectural enterprises after 1932; in some cases, such as the Foro Mussolini in Rome, he played a significant role, although this has been completely overlooked in the post-war literature. How did he respond to the representational and propagandistic requirements of fascist patronage?

## 7.2 'Vedere il Fascismo': Rosso's representation of Fascism<sup>30</sup>

Alongside the bureaucratic definition of the relationship between artists and the state, a debate developed about a possible form of 'fascist art'. The arts were asked to envision

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<sup>28</sup> Stone (1998), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Rosso participated in a competition to decorate the façade of the Reggio Emilia railway station (see Chapter 4) and the interiors of the Royal pavilion of the Santa Maria Novella railway station, Florence [Francesco Bandini (ed.), *La Nuova Stazione di Firenze S.M.N. (1935–1985) Italo Gamberini e il Gruppo Toscano*, (Florence: Alinea, 1987)]. Cartoons were also submitted to a competition to design wall mosaics for the main hall of the Palazzo dei Congressi of the E42, Rome (ACS, Fondo E42, Servizi Artistici, b. 920, fasc. 9170).

<sup>30</sup> This was the title of Bottai's review of the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*: Giuseppe Bottai, 'Vedere il Fascismo', *Critica Fascista*, 01/11/1932, p. 401.



its objectives: to 'tell stories, to combine new myths and fables, to invent characters and plots'; and ultimately, to participate in constructing the identity of Fascism and to legitimise it among its target audience: the masses.<sup>31</sup> The preferred format for promoting an encounter between the masses and the arts of the regime was the propagandistic exhibition, and these were extremely successful.<sup>32</sup> The first exhibition of this sort was the MRF, which celebrated the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome (22 October 1922), the coup that allowed Mussolini to seize power. The exhibition 'situated the history of Fascism in the historical context of Italian civilisation', recounting Fascism's history, from the origin of the movement to 1932.<sup>33</sup> It had a lasting impact on the debate that was developing around the question of a suitable form(s) of expression for the fascist era.

Rather than presenting the historical documents in a conventional way, this show was intended as an experience to be lived and felt, ritual and inaugural at the same time, as interpreted by Schnapp.<sup>34</sup> The 'holy pilgrimage' culminated in the *Sacrario dei martiri* (shrine of the martyrs), designed by Adalberto Libera. Here, the circular shape of the wall, the repetition of the word 'presente', a cross in the middle emerging from a red-lit 'pool of blood', and the music of *Giovinezza*, enacted the mystic synthesis of vitalism and sacrifice, violence and redemption, and individualism and anonymity that constituted the essence of Fascism's discourse (fig. 7.1).<sup>35</sup> Artists and architects involved in the design of the MRF, among whom there were Mario Sironi and Giuseppe Terragni, responded to Mussolini's order 'to create a contemporary style, very modern and audacious.'<sup>36</sup> Camillo Pellizzi wrote that the 'indisputably alive and effective' result of the exhibition was entirely due to the artists: 'members of Stracittà and Strapaese, the Novecento, academics and futurists and isolated rebels [...] extremely diverse talents, and often opposed to each other, converge towards a collaborative and solid

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<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Schnapp and Barbara Spackman, 'Selection from the Great Debate on Fascism and Culture: *Critica Fascista* 1926–1927', in *Stanford Italian Review*, 1–2 (1990), 250.

<sup>32</sup> Vittorio Vidotto, *Roma Contemporanea*, (Bari: Laterza, 1996), p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> Simonetta Fraquelli, 'All Roads Lead to Rome', in Dawn Ades et al. (eds.), *Arts and Propaganda. Europe under the dictators 1930–45*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Schnapp, *Anno X* (2003), p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> *Giovinezza* (Youth) (Nino Oxilia, Giuseppe Blanc, 1909), a goliardic university hymn adopted by the *Arditi* corps during World War I became Fascism's hymn.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in: Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 189.

expression.<sup>37</sup> The *Mostra* seemed to demonstrate that aesthetic pluralism, once disciplined within the propagandistic scope of the regime, could develop a form of unitary creation, a true and innovative fascist *Gesamtkunstwerk* (fig. 7.2).

Mario Sironi, who designed the rooms that introduced the *Mostra* shrine, also, during the same year, designed the huge stained-glass window representing the *Carta del Lavoro* (the Labour Charter) for Piacentini and Vaccaro's Ministry of Corporations in Rome (1932). These works constituted the practical corollary to his *Manifesto della Pittura Murale*, published at the end of 1933 (but anticipated by an article in January 1932).<sup>38</sup> According to the *Manifesto*, 'in the fascist state, art is to have an educational function. It must generate the ethics of our time. It must give unity of style and grandeur of lines to the common life.'<sup>39</sup> In order to achieve such objectives, artists had to reject the elitism of easel painting and communicate directly with the people, engaging with and inspiring as broad an audience as possible from the walls of public buildings. Sironi was anything but alone in such a belief: already in 1927, Gino Severini wished that easel painting could 'become an exception, the decorative art being the rule'.<sup>40</sup> With these interventions, Severini and Sironi launched in Italy a debate that was already engaging artists in Europe and America.

Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943) in Germany and Fernand Léger (1881–1955) in France are just two examples of artists who, during the same years, manifested their dissatisfaction with easel painting.<sup>41</sup> The Mexican muralists argued from very similar premises, although they were animated by opposing political views.<sup>42</sup> Sironi could boast of a closer kinship with the tradition from which all of these modern followers took inspiration. Through the revival of the Italian tradition of decorative and mural art 'new problems of space, form, expression, lyric, epic, or dramatic content [...] a renewal of

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Schnapps (2003), p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> The *Manifesto* was also signed by the artists Massimo Campigli, Carlo Carrà, and Achille Funi. See Benzi (2013), pp. 137, 326–328.

<sup>39</sup> 'Manifesto della Pittura Murale', *La Colonna*, 12 (1933), 11–12.

<sup>40</sup> Severini, Gino, 'Idolatria dell'Arte e decadenza del quadro', in Gino Severini, *Ragionamenti sulle Arti Figurative*, (Milan: Hoepli, 1936), pp. 42, 44.

<sup>41</sup> Vittorio Fagone, Giovanna Ginex, and Tulliola Sparagni (eds.), *Muri ai Pittori. Pittura murale e decorazione in Italia 1930–1950*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1999), pp. 45–46.

<sup>42</sup> Romy Golan affirms that 'surprising as it may sound, no European seems to have uttered a single word about the murals on the far side of the Atlantic.' Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: the paradox of wall painting, Europe 1927–1957*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 1.

rhythms, equilibriums, and constructive spirit' would be established.<sup>43</sup> The 'birth of a fascist style' would be conjured up while confirming the *Italianità* of mural art, i.e. 'the continuity, in terms of style and reference', with a tradition that stretched back to Giotto and Michelangelo.<sup>44</sup> Given these premises, the 1933 Triennale curated by Sironi, Ponti, and Felice, in engaging with 'the battle for mural painting' as stated in the programme, assumed an ambitiously experimental as well as highly polemical stance.<sup>45</sup>

Rosso, by virtue of his long experience as a successful decorator, was among more than thirty artists invited to cover the walls of Giovanni Muzio's new Palazzo dell'Arte with murals. The decorator broke with his usual, and widely appreciated, graceful manner, to experiment with an original, raw, and austere language and a highly symbolic theme. His work was a response to the regime's challenge to artists, and it demonstrated how problematic both the formulation and the reception of a 'fascist' public art could be. The title of his mural, *Il Buon Governo* (fig. 7.3) echoed *The Allegory of Good Government*, a fresco painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (ca. 1290–1348) in the Palazzo Pubblico di Siena in 1338 (fig. 7.4); contemporary critics considered it a modern re-invention of the earlier work.<sup>46</sup> However, Rosso borrowed only a few iconographic elements from Lorenzetti's complex allegory of municipal power.

Lorenzetti's fresco had a balanced composition in which two groups of figures were arranged in pyramidal structures: the first, presided by Godly Wisdom, illustrated the administration of justice; the second, surmounted by the three theological virtues, embodied the Municipality. Citizens of all classes formed a procession on the lower level, interlacing the two allegories together with a cord that linked the wrists of the two angels serving Justice with the masculine allegory of the *Comune*. Rosso gave his scene a pyramidal and symmetrical composition, but simplified his allegory by framing the participants in one structure, dominated by a statue of a hieratic female figure on a high plinth. Holding an axe (interpretable as a stylised *fascio*) and a book (like Lorenzetti's

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<sup>43</sup> Mario Sironi, 'Pittura Murale', (first published in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 01/01/1932), in Ettore Camesasca (ed.), *Mario Sironi, Scritti editi ed inediti*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982), p. 115.

<sup>44</sup> Benzi (2013), p. 243.

<sup>45</sup> 'Il programma della V Triennale di Arti Decorative e Industriali di Milano', *Domus*, 5 (1933), 223. The debate on the 'Pittura Murale' has been reconstructed in Fagone (1999), pp. 13–23.

<sup>46</sup> Ugo Nebbia, 'Il Palazzo dell'Arte', *Lidel*, 5 (1933), 24.

*Wisdom*) as symbols of a superior, ideal authority, this figure represented fascist Italy presiding over the fascist state.<sup>47</sup>

Rosso's composition reflected Fascism's conception of the State, i.e. 'the transcendent agent through which Italy's historical greatness would be achieved.'<sup>48</sup> In 1929, Mussolini had declared that 'the individual exists only insofar as he is within the State and subjected to the requirements of the State.'<sup>49</sup> In Rosso's painting, architecture articulates this relationship. The citizens are framed and enclosed within the productive categories to which they belong: two builders, a fisherman, a peasant woman, two athletes, an engineer, and an aviator. The rigid symmetry and metaphysical simplicity of this work reflects 'the rational organisation of society [as a] work of art' whose characteristics are the 'harmony and symmetry' noted by George Simmel and associated by Falasca-Zamponi with Mussolini's aesthetic politics.<sup>50</sup> By quoting the title of such an illustrious predecessor, Rosso invited his audience to imagine the work in an analogous context – the place of government – and as having a similar function: to represent political authority inspired by a superior, spiritual ideal. Rosso made explicit the link with tradition in order to declare the *italianità* of his work, and reject all past accusations of being too dependent on foreign influences. Yet, Lorenzetti's interconnected religious and lay authorities and representation of the citizens of Siena actively guaranteeing (and guarding) the link between justice and power were of no use to Rosso. Instead, he attempted to do what Lorenzetti would have done, had he lived under the fascist regime: give a visual interpretation of the current dominant authority/patron.

Mussolini, the dictator towards whom the 'messianic expectations of Italian people' were directed, is represented by Rosso as the final figure on the right-hand side, wearing an aviator's suit.<sup>51</sup> This is one of many images of the dictator in contemporary propaganda that aimed to increase his cult of popularity: in the guise of a pilot, Mussolini

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<sup>47</sup> In ancient Rome, the word *fascis* signified a bundle of equal rods tied together to an axe. It was used as a symbol of authority in processions featuring high magistrates.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Marla Stone, 'A flexible Rome: Fascism and the cult of *Romanità*', in Catharine Edwards (ed.), *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 207.

<sup>49</sup> Mussolini's speech to the Assembly of the Fascist National Party, Rome, 14/09/1929. In Benito Mussolini, *Fascism*, (Rome: Ardita, 1935), p. 38.

<sup>50</sup> Falasca-Zamponi (2000), p. 28. On 'The State as a Work of Art' see also Jacob Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 104.

embodies the intrepid and innovative leader.<sup>52</sup> He gazes intently up at the statue-icon of the motherland, a pose from the iconography of saints inspired by divine grace (or, in Lorenzetti's mural, Justice looking up at Godly Wisdom). This is not the only element that Rosso borrowed from religious iconography. Indeed, the architectural structure that frames and also connects the diverse characters can be associated with the iconography of the Christ-vine as a visual metaphor for the Church. This was used to represent the connection and relationship of dependence between Christ (the authority) and the apostles and saints who made up the *ecclesia* (institution). Rosso turns the natural elements of Christian iconography into artificial versions that evoke an image of the state as a construction of men, which, nonetheless, is pervaded by a mystical and spiritual value.

Notably, Mussolini is represented on the same level as the other figures, drawing on the stereotype of the leader as a 'man of the people', the son of a humble blacksmith and a teacher, who, by virtue of his exceptional gifts, fought his way to power to restore the glory of Italy and the Italians. Any suggestion of a class divide is omitted, as the class struggle had been firmly negated by Fascism. The first systematic exposition of fascist ideology, authored in 1932 by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), argued that the 'State is above the individuals, the classes and the categories [...] it aims to develop the production.'<sup>53</sup> This concept was first introduced in the Labour Charter, through which the Corporative State was established in 1927. Its first article stated: 'the Italian Nation is an organism having aims, life, means of action superior in power and duration than those of the individuals and groups that form it.'<sup>54</sup> The six characters that appear under the stylised portico do not correspond to the seven corporate sectors (introduced only in 1934: Agriculture, Industry, Credit, Commerce, Terrestrial and Maritime Transport, and Professionals and Artists). However, they reflect the corporative aim of the regime: to enlist Italian citizens by occupation (both employers and employees). The central group, consisting of a young standing child and her or his seated parents facing forward, stood for the peasant family, the symbol of the 'physical

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<sup>52</sup> Fernando Esposito, 'In "the shadow of the winged machine": The *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* and the Ascension of Myth in the Slipstream Modernity', *Modernism/modernity*, 1 (2012), 142; Falasca Zamponi (2000), p. 117.

<sup>53</sup> Giovanni Gentile, Benito Mussolini, Arturo Marpicati, 'Fascismo', *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere e Arti*, 16 vols. (Milan: Bestetti, Tumminelli, Treves, 1932), XIV, pp. 847–884.

<sup>54</sup> Giordano Bruno Guerri, 'Vita politica e sociale', in Renato Barilli et al. (eds.), *Gli Anni Trenta. Arte e Cultura in Italia*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1983), p. 28.

and moral health of the race.’<sup>55</sup> At the same time, it is worth noting that Rosso’s usual patrons, those for whom he had worked in the past, were not included. This is hardly surprising, given that Fascism was entering its anti-bourgeoisie phase: the text in the *Treccani* encyclopaedia, while praising lower- and middle-class individuals who had given their support to the fascist party, reserved little or no space for the ‘parasitic, sceptical, and neutralist’ upper class.<sup>56</sup> Rosso’s allegorical composition, by engaging with the fascist idea of the State, is, ultimately, a portrait of Fascism itself.

However, Fascism presented Rosso with rather different requirements than his previous patrons, forcing him to pursue new approaches, especially in terms of style. In previous chapters, I have pointed out episodes in which Rosso abandoned his amusing style to engage with a rather different language, marked by a strong chiaroscuro and a characterisation of figures that privileged expressive forms and dark atmospheres. The figures inhabiting Piacentini’s villa Quota 110, examined in Chapter 5, are the offspring of those who populate *Il Buon Governo*: rigid examples of an astonished and awkward humanity. It is useful here to reconstruct the possible references embedded in Rosso’s stylistic choice, in order to comprehend his reasons for choosing that language and the use he made of it afterwards.

The ‘first effort carried out by Fascism towards self-representation’ was the MRF, celebrated by artists and architects for its uncompromising, anti-academic approach.<sup>57</sup> ‘This is the warrior-like soul and the face of the new fascist Italy, rough, and yet inspiring thoughtful delicacy’, wrote Sarfatti, ‘so diverse from the old and conventional clichés of the either languorous and sentimental or sceptical and superficial Italy.’<sup>58</sup> Rosso must have reflected on the tension between his reputation as a ‘painter of cheerfulness’, renowned for the graciousness and wit of his compositions, and the tendencies within the MRF that embodied a fascist art. The core values of the practice of decoration were questioned; as it was generally considered a feminine practice, its involvement in regime art was controversial.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Fascism constantly privileged virility and strength in its

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<sup>55</sup> Andrea di Michele, ‘I diversi volti del ruralismo fascista’, *Italia contemporanea*, 199 (1995), 250.

<sup>56</sup> Gentile (1932), p. 852.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey Schnapp, *Anno X* (2003), p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, ‘Architettura, Arte e Simbolo alla Mostra del Fascismo’, *Architettura*, 12 (1933), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Lori Young, ‘Regen(d)erating decoration: cultural narrative in ornamented fonts’, in Leslie Atzmon (ed.), (Anderson: Parlor Press), pp. 394–395.

discourse: 'life, as conceived by the Fascist, is serious, austere, religious.'<sup>60</sup> When Sironi championed mural decoration as the true fascist art, the potential gendered ambiguity of his proposal must have been somewhere at the back of his mind. Arguing that art had to go back to its status as decoration, he specified that 'decoration' could not be that 'of the amateurs and of the young lady-artists who filled the old biennials of decorative arts with floral table runners and earthenware.'<sup>61</sup> For Sironi, the new, fascist, muralism necessitated a 'strong and virile approach.'<sup>62</sup> He translated this vision into his fresco for the 1933 Triennale *Le opere e i giorni – Il Lavoro* (fig. 7.5), which evoked suggestive forms and dark atmospheres, referring to and conflating different epochs in a synthetic, suspended, and monumental vision.<sup>63</sup>

In his reflections on the forms of fascist public art, Rosso must also have been aware of the '*primordialismo*' theory introduced by artist Corrado Cagli; *Il Buon Governo* presents more similarities with the latter's art than with Sironi's.<sup>64</sup> Cagli had intervened in the debate on muralism with an article published in *Quadrante* in May 1933. Here, the artist argued that easel painting no longer had a historical purpose; the walls were the appropriate space for an art that aimed to be 'cyclical and polyphonic,' and pervaded by 'wonder and primordium.'<sup>65</sup> Cagli's idea of 'primordium' consisted in 'rejecting any narrative and bourgeois factor' for 'an autonomous, monumental vision [...] an emotive concept of immanent myth.'<sup>66</sup> Influenced by his uncle, the prominent writer Massimo Bontempelli (1878–1960), Cagli wanted to represent Fascism as a modern myth (fig. 7.6). For him, as for Sironi, artists had to conjure up a symbolic and evocative spectacle, charm the senses, and appeal to the emotions: people had to be inspired and moved, rather than taught.

*Il Buon Governo* represents Rosso's response to the conflicting roles within his practice: fashionable decorator for the high-bourgeoisie versus (want-to-be) militant 'constructor' of Fascism's public image and identity. To embody the latter role, he

<sup>60</sup> Giovanni Gentile, 'Dottrina del Fascismo', in Mussolini (1935), p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Mario Sironi, 'Il volto', *La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, 4 (1938), 38.

<sup>62</sup> *Manifesto* (1933), 12. The view of mural decoration – and fresco in particular – as necessitating a 'virile' approach is a long-standing cliché found in Vasari's *Introduzione alle tre arti del disegno* (1550). See Angela Mazzè, *La Decorazione Murale. Stucchi, affreschi, graffiti nella trattatistica* (I sec. a.C. – XIX sec.), (Palermo: Ila Palma, 1998), p. 88.

<sup>63</sup> Braun (2003), pp. 226–228.

<sup>64</sup> Benzi (2013), p. 74.

<sup>65</sup> Corrado Cagli, 'Muri ai Pittori', *Quadrante*, 1 (1933), 19.

<sup>66</sup> Benzi (2013), pp. 145–146, 167.

engaged with stylistic solutions borrowed from the Scuola Romana, of which Cagli was part. As Fabio Benzi commented, ‘there is no artist in Rome that could escape the attraction’ of their *tonalismo*, their approach to constructing a painting through an ‘abstract architecture of colours’.<sup>67</sup> Rosso must have seen the exhibition that, in 1932, the Galleria Bardi dedicated to Cagli, Emanuele Cavalli (1904–1981), Giuseppe Capogrossi (1900–1972), and Fausto Pirandello (1899–1975), as well as Cagli’s mural decorations in public spaces, such as the fresco for the 1932 *Mostra dell’Edilizia* in Rome (fig. 7.7). From that point on, thanks to his proximity to some members of the Scuola who were colleagues at the MAI, Rosso followed its developments. His interest in the Scuola’s ‘savage realism’ and preference for ‘figures [...] in the grip of a cultural regression that brings them back to childhood, or to a state of psychological primitivism’ is demonstrated by paintings such as *La Rissa* (1935) (fig. 7.8).<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, the language Rosso introduced in *Il Buon Governo* did not become his usual style in public commissions. Rather, he kept changing his approach to respond to the diverse exigencies of the regime, whose fluctuating ideology and political agenda made the task of visual interpretation problematic. The reception of Rosso’s Triennale fresco shows, rather tellingly, that the critics themselves were confused about what this new fascist art should look like. On the one hand, ‘a more substantial approach to figuration’ was appreciated by Scarpa; Ugo Nebbia wrote that, after the uneasiness provoked by other works, he felt ‘reassured’ by Rosso’s fresco.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, and more crucially, I believe – Rosso’s ex-collaborator and supporter, Roberto Papini, made the harshest comment of all: ‘[Rosso] has lost himself in a fog of idiocy.’<sup>70</sup> Of what did Rosso’s idiocy consist? The general notes introducing Papini’s criticism of Rosso suggest that the critic disliked both the stylistic and thematic choices made by the decorator. As he did not believe that artists or decorators should create on their own, without the guidance of architects, the very concept of the event was ill-fated. He denounced the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 169–170.

<sup>68</sup> Renato Barilli, ‘I realisti “selvaggi” degli anni Trenta’, in Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant (eds.), *Arte Italiana. Presenze 1900–1945*, (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), p. 245. The brawl was a frequent subject of the painters of the Scuola Romana: Rosso owned Ziveri’s *La Rissa* (1938, now in GNAM, Rome). Edoardo Rosso, personal interview, 02/02/2014

<sup>69</sup> AGR, press clippings, Piero Scarpa, ‘Alla V Triennale di Milano – Pittura murale e scultura decorativa’, *Il Messaggero*, 26/05/1933; Nebbia (1933), 24.

<sup>70</sup> Roberto Papini, ‘La V Triennale di Milano. Ispezione alle Arti’, *Emporium*, 468 (1933), 336. According to Vitali, Rosso was not up to the task; see Lamberto Vitali, ‘La pittura murale alla Triennale’, *Domus*, 66 (1933), 286–291.



dominant tendency to 'make forms clumsy, oversimplify the tones, the quest for deformation and brutality at all costs, the grimace and the pointless gesture of violence; [they] demonstrate[d] a superficial interpretation of modernity.'<sup>71</sup> Papini had highlighted an important point: the brutal characterisation of figuration that characterized arguably the best of the Triennale works, such as Sironi and Cagli's frescos, risked undermining the celebratory aim that was inherent the genre of public mural art. The fascist regime, as all regimes, as Raffaello Giolli noted, wanted to '*vedere roseo*' (see through rose-tinted glasses) at all costs.<sup>72</sup> The fact that Rosso aligned himself with those offering a rather gloomy and rough vision of Fascism demonstrates his willing to challenge predictable and academic forms of flattering celebration, at least in the experimental context of the Triennale. However, in so doing, he positioned himself in a difficult situation in respect to his potential patron.

### 7.3 Addressing the masses: *romanitas*, modernity, and the language of Fascism

Dennis P. Doordan has commented that, 'it is in the nature of political design to inspire and reassure rather than disturb and confuse its audience.'<sup>73</sup> The criticism Rosso attracted with his 1933 mural and the polemics that constantly engulfed those who rejected a conventionally figurative approach, must have convinced Rosso that, in order to produce an 'image for the masses, invested with a precise social function', a more legible, pleasant, and academic style was the best solution.<sup>74</sup> The murals painted for the *Sala delle Feste* (Ballroom) in the Dopolavoro Universitario of the La Sapienza University Campus in Rome (Gaetano Minnucci, 1935) (figs. 7.9, 7.10) and the *Sala del Consiglio* (Board room) of the Palazzo dell'Economia Corporativa in Pesaro (Paniconi and Pediconi, 1936) (figs. 7.11, 7.12) featured well-proportioned, academically-defined nudes.<sup>75</sup> Both compositions associated an allegorical figure representing Fascism (either as Winged Victory or as a mythological divinity) with a collage of episodes relating to economic

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Fagone (1999), p. 18. Giolli published an article defending the independent choices of the artists of the Triennale against critics who pretended a more optimistic and serene image of the present. Raffaello Giolli, 'Difesa dell'artista', *Colosseo*, 3, (1933), 145–148.

<sup>73</sup> Dennis P. Doordan, 'In the Shadow of the Fasces: Political Design in Fascist Italy', *Design Issues*, 1 (1997), 47.

<sup>74</sup> Malvano (1988), p. 48.

<sup>75</sup> Bartolomeo Azzaro, *La Città Universitaria della Sapienza di Roma e le sedi esterne 1907–1932*, (Roma: Gangemi, 2012), pp. 330, 367. Riccardo Gulli, *La vicenda costruttiva del Palazzo dell'Economia Corporativa di Pesaro (1932–1936)*, in Paolo Chini and Romana Quattrini (eds.), *Futuro del Novecento – il Palazzo dell'Economia Corporativa di Pesaro*, (Urbino: QuattroVenti, 2006), pp. 49–55.

activities, technology, creativity, and political militancy. In Rosso's visions, the complexity of reality was brought to harmonious synthesis by the intervention of mythic personifications from a legendary past, which, under the aegis of the *fascio*, relentlessly advanced towards a bright future of glory. This solution brought together past, present and future, categories, ages, and classes, conflated in a teleological vision aimed at demonstrating the inevitable outcome of the fascist 'revolution', i.e. (male) supremacy. Rosso developed all the potentialities of this approach in the Foro Mussolini sport complex in Rome (1933–1937), where he worked with Angelo Canevari (1901–1955), Gino Severini, and Achille Capizzano (1907–1951).

The Foro Mussolini, located between the eastern bank of the river Tiber and the Monte Mario hill in Rome, was built by the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB), the fascist organisation that enlisted young Italians in semi-military educational sections, and was responsible for building sport complexes all around the country (figs. 7.13, 7.14). Sport had an important role in fascist propaganda, as mass-spectacle, a source of national pride, and training in military discipline.<sup>76</sup> The ONB was 'a singular and modern institution aimed at both the formation of the new generations according to the fascist image and the construction of mass consensus.'<sup>77</sup> Its mission made the design of the Foro all the more significant.

Originally designed to host the Academy of Physical Education and a stadium for training sports teachers, the functions attached to the complex rapidly grew and diversified, reflecting the ambitions of the head of the ONB, Renato Ricci.<sup>78</sup> This drive was accompanied by a parallel aspiration: to 'create something of worth, not only from the technical, planning, and sporting point of view, but also and above all from the aesthetic one; the monumental effort, this sort of pact with eternity, is the true feature of the Foro Mussolini.'<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the Foro Mussolini was considered a modern re-enactment of the Roman *fora*, public spaces at the centre of newly founded *municipia* (towns). In this sense, the erection of a new urban quarter represented the symbolic gesture with which

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<sup>76</sup> Roberta Vescovi, 'Children into Soldiers: Sport and Fascist Italy', in J. A. Mangan (ed.), *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War without Weapons*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), pp. 169–182.

<sup>77</sup> Carmen Betti, *L'Opera Nazionale Balilla e l'educazione fascista*, (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1984), p. XVI.

<sup>78</sup> Antonella Greco, and Salvatore Santuccio, *Il Foro Italico*, (Rome: Multigrafica, 1991). On Renato Ricci see Giuseppe Zanzanini, *Renato Ricci – Fascista Integrale*, (Milan: Mursia, 2004).

<sup>79</sup> ONB, *Il Foro Mussolini*, (Milan: Bompiani, 1937), pp. 16–17.

Mussolini re-founded Rome as the fascist capital.<sup>80</sup> Its dedication expressed the imperial ambition of the dictator, who was adding to the ruined *fora* of the historical city (named after the emperors who built them), this new architectural complex.<sup>81</sup> In the Foro Mussolini, Fascism looked for an architectural and visual definition in which the concept of *italianità*, within which it had first looked for a representative framework, was stretched until it reached and melted into that of *romanitas*.

As argued by historian Emilio Gentile, for Mussolini, the myth of Rome was universal, linked to the past as much as projected towards the future, when the modern mission of Italy in the world would be accomplished fully.<sup>82</sup> According to Giulio Quirino Giglioli in a presentation at the 1937 *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, Rome was both the synthesis of the most advanced civilisations of the Eastern Mediterranean and the creator of a 'superior' one, which had introduced norms of 'order, discipline, and equity.' The Italian people, Rome's legitimate heirs, revived during the Renaissance as a 'hegemonic people in the sciences and arts, [...], in the name of the *Fascio* ha[d] created [...] the norms of a new political order of civilised people.'<sup>83</sup> Within Fascism's mythic discourse, there was no distinction between past and present: there was only a continuous tradition that found its synthesis in the idea of Rome.<sup>84</sup> Rosso and the other artists working at the Foro tried different ways to express this telescopic interpretation of history.

The materials used, black and white mosaics and Carrara marble for the sculptures, offered *per se* an obvious reference to Roman art. The official publication on the Foro, edited by the ONB, assured readers that the decorative themes chosen by artists were based on 'ancient motifs known through the examples from the Baths of Caracalla'.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the artists reinterpreted Roman traditions freely. Antonella Greco has described how they deployed 'fertile and often ironic imagery, with extremely various references

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<sup>80</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra*, (Bari: Laterza, 2007), p. 159.

<sup>81</sup> ONB (1937), p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Gentile (2007), pp. VII–VIII.

<sup>83</sup> Giulio Quirino Giglioli, *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, (Rome: Colombo, 1937), pp. XI–XII

<sup>84</sup> Claudia Lazzaro, and Roger J. Crum (eds.), *Donatello among the Blackshirts*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> ONB, (1937), pp. 73–75.

[...] a textual *romanità*, contradicted by a playful and humorous imagination.<sup>86</sup> For his mosaics for the floors of the *Termae* (covered swimming pools), Rosso requested that the tesserae be processed in a grinder before being assembled.<sup>87</sup> This technique abraded the edges and surfaces, making the tesserae resemble those of ancient mosaics when rediscovered after centuries of oblivion. Rosso turned the appropriation of Roman culture into a neo-archaeological exercise, celebrating the fascination aroused by vestiges of the city's past glory, rather than its ancient values. However, it is necessary to contextualise various different episodes, as specific spaces and the periods of time when they were decorated also raise issues that are crucial for an effective assessment of visual propaganda and potential elements of discontinuity. Indeed, Rosso's black and white mosaics for the interiors of the *Termae* are substantially different from those of the piazzale dell'Impero and della Vittoria. The latter two had ceremonial functions that the former did not have. In the *piazzali*, decoration reflected the representational and self-defining imperatives of the patron, while in the *Termae*, Rosso was negotiating with both the training *and* leisure purposes of the space.

The *Termae*, opened in 1937, were designed by the engineer Costantino Costantini (1904–1982). Rosso designed mosaics for the floors and Canevari for the walls. A comparative analysis of the two schemes reveals the diverse ways in which the fascist mythic discourse could be interpreted. Canevari's mosaics are a glorious celebration of classical style, themes, and values: contemporary male athletes are shown running, diving, and exercising, or resting and meditating on the vision of gods, goddesses, horses, and hippocampi represented on the wall behind the diving board (figs. 7.15, 7.16). The correlation between modern athletes and mythological figures is obvious: this is the bodily triumph of the new Italian man, shaped by Fascism on the model of a Greco-Roman hero.

Rosso's floor mosaics in this space, and also in the adjacent small swimming pool (designed, respectively, in December 1934–January 1935, and November–December

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<sup>86</sup> Antonella Greco, 'Il Foro Mussolini: mosaici e decorazioni tra Del Debbio e Moretti', in Simonetta Lux (ed.), *Avanguardia, Tradizione, Ideologia: itinerari attraverso un ventennio di dibattito sulla pittura e plastica murale*, (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 1990), pp. 438–439.

<sup>87</sup> G. Badino et al., 'I mosaici del Foro Italico in Roma (1934–37): caratteristiche esecutive, tipologie di degrado e interventi di manutenzione e restauro', in *Scienza e Beni Culturali*, a. XVIII (2002), pp. 429–438.

1935) offered a different approach.<sup>88</sup> Around the larger rectangular pool, Rosso arranged groups of sea creatures twisting and swirling at regular intervals, very like those he designed for the Sphere Fountain in 1933 (figs. 7.17, 7.18).<sup>89</sup> The figures of two young men appear in the central groups along the longer sides of the pool: both are shown swimming elegantly, one with a crocodile and the other with a shark (fig. 7.19). Their iconographic precedent can be found in the swimmers from the *Terme dei Cisiarii* (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) in Ostia Antica (fig. 7.20). Yet, Rosso's swimmers show a confidence that suggests a sort of communion with the huge beasts that accompany them; it is a scene from a primordial, mythic age of harmonious natural coexistence between humans and animals. There is no trace of heroism, discipline, or sacrifice. Fossils, skeletons, and bones scattered through the compositions stand as unexpected but inescapable *memento mori*. They undermine ironically the 'pact with eternity' since, as Barry Curtis has observed, 'the concept of the extinction of the dinosaur carries connotations of anxiety about human vulnerability' (figs. 7.21, 7.22).<sup>90</sup> Rosso's mosaics expose the unpredictable consequences of the practice of appropriation: from the Roman past, artists could pick up ideas that were irrelevant, if not incongruous, to Fascism's propaganda goals.

This eccentric approach is further accentuated in the mosaic floor of the small swimming pool. To the usual repertoire of sea creatures, Rosso added birds, and marine, and Arctic mammals. Some were engaged in circus performances (figs. 7.23, 7.24). Instead of fierce and scary beasts against which the *balilla* and *avanguardisti* of the ONB (8 to 17 years old) could measure their bravery, Rosso arranged a parade of trained animals. This intersection between sport and entertainment reflected the contemporary view of sport as part of a new, fascist, mass spectacle of 'allegories and heroic fables', in the words of

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<sup>88</sup> Gabriella Bucco, 'Giulio Rosso, *Pavimento per la piscina olimpionica: animali marini*, 1934–36' and 'Giulio Rosso, *Piscina pensile: pesci, crostacei e stelle marine*, 1937', in Alessandro Giacomello and Antonio Giusa (eds.), *La Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli*, (Udine: Centro di catalogazione e restauro dei Beni Culturali, 2000), pp. 166–169, 190–193.

<sup>89</sup> ACS, Presidenza Consiglio dei Ministri, 1934–36, fasc. 7/2, sottofasc. 3856, Report signed by Ricci to the Head of the Government on the works of the Foro Mussolini, dated 22/05/1935. Designed at the end of 1933 (opened in 1935) by architects Mario Paniconi (1904–1973) and Giulio Pediconi (1906–1999); Rosso, who designed the circular mosaic floor around the basin, re-interpreted motifs from Roman baths in Ostia Antica. Rosso also designed mosaics for Paniconi and Pediconi's ONB museum, a visionary project that included a colossal statue of Mussolini/Hercules, eighty meters high on top of Monte Mario. Greco (1991), p. 54.

<sup>90</sup> Barry Curtis, 'Dinosaur Design', in Leslie Atzmon (ed.), *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*, (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2011), p. 259.

Anton Giulio Bragaglia.<sup>91</sup> However, by subverting the behaviours normally associated with wild animals, Rosso stifled any possible rhetoric concerning modern legionaries, gladiators, heroes, or champions. Although the mosaics were designed during the first months of the Ethiopian War (2 October 1935 – 5 May 1936), Rosso decided to amuse rather than inspire the young *balilla*, as he had already done in the ONB building in Varese (architect Ballio Morpurgo, 1929). In that case, Rosso had filled the apse of the main hall with scenes representing the young *balilla* at play: his source of inspiration was clearly the illustrations in contemporary children's magazines (fig. 7.25).<sup>92</sup> These schemes, which are among Rosso's most original, departed from the instructive or ideal figuration typical of contemporary educational structures sponsored by the regime at that time.<sup>93</sup>

Rosso's subsequent commission in the Foro, the spectacular carpet of black and white mosaics with which the architect Luigi Moretti covered the monumental entrance to the complex, required a different approach. The thoroughfare connected and framed the monolithic obelisk and Sphere Fountain, the two monuments strategically placed at its extremes.<sup>94</sup> Both were symbols of regal power, transformed into gigantic geometrical marble presences; they marked the beginning and end of a celebratory route towards the geographical heart of the complex. Indeed, the piazzale della Vittoria was placed at the intersection between routes leading to the Olympic stadium, the Academia, and the southern sector, where the tennis grounds, *Termae*, and Moretti's Fencing Academy were located. This was the stage for Fascism's 'Mass Ornament', i.e. the performative and aesthetic use of masses of people during rallies and parades.<sup>95</sup> Here more than everywhere else, decoration had to envision that 'pact' between Fascism and eternity that Ricci wanted to guarantee through the actions of the ONB.

Although the area was designed by Moretti as a unique space (fig. 7.26), the mosaics were commissioned in two stages. Those for the circular square around the Sphere

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<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Schnapp (1996), p. 201 (but see also pp. 47–48). From 1934, within the organisation of the corporative state, professional athletes were included within the Corporation of Spectacle.

<sup>92</sup> 'Edifici dell'architetto Morpurgo in Varese', *Architettura e Arti Decorative*, 5–6 (1930), 249.

<sup>93</sup> Rinaldo Capomolla, Marco Mulazzani, and Rosalia Vittorini, *Case del Balilla: architettura e Fascismo*, (Milan: Electa, 2008).

<sup>94</sup> The obelisk, designed in 1931 by Costantini, was placed at the entrance of the Foro in 1934. See Marco Mulazzani, 'Roma, il Foro Mussolini. Gli artefici, le opere, i progetti', *Casabella*, 1 (December 2004/January 2005), p. 27.

<sup>95</sup> The concept of 'mass ornament' is taken from Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, written in 1927, first published in 1966, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Fountain (called piazzale della Vittoria) were designed by Giulio Rosso (with limited interventions by Capizzano) between March and September 1936 (installed in January–February 1937); those for the thoroughfare (known as piazzale del Monolite, and later dell’Impero) were designed by Rosso, Canevari, Capizzano, and Severini and installed between December 1936 and April 1937.<sup>96</sup> Between the first and second phases, the conquest of Ethiopia took place (9 May 1936), causing a major shift in the image that Fascism projected of itself. The ideological discourse that, in piazzale della Vittoria, was developed mainly on a mythic, metaphorical level, in piazzale dell’Impero had to become a chronicle: when the imperial dream of Fascism turned into reality, it was Rosso’s task to find suitable imagery to represent it.

In piazzale della Vittoria, Rosso turned the representation of modern sport into a metaphor for a project of totalitarian social reconstruction.<sup>97</sup> The eight large panels around the Sphere Fountain were the first to be designed and installed; they represented young men engaged in different modern sports and athletic pursuits (figs. 7.27, 7.28). This iconography reflected the Foro’s primary function as a sports complex, even more so after Rome’s candidacy to host the XII Olympic Games (1936). On the edges and between the large panels were images that referenced different themes: labour, games, and figures of antique appearance. Rosso’s athletes are characterised by a remarkable gentleness and elegance of line; although they are very large, Rosso keeps the definition of details to a minimum, flattening the figures and relishing the decorative effect of their black shapes, against the white background. Instead, the accompanying figures – warriors, animals, and workers – are more vividly outlined, three-dimensional, and realistic.

The fact that they were implemented by different workshops cannot explain these different stylistic approaches.<sup>98</sup> It seems clear that Rosso wanted to distinguish the ideal

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<sup>96</sup> Bucco (2000), pp. 156–159, 194–199.

<sup>97</sup> A number of large sketches by Achille Capizzano representing possible solutions for the piazzale della Vittoria are kept in the ACS, Fondo Moretti, b. ‘Foro Mussolini’. It is unclear why Rosso took over the commission; however, documents kept in the Spilimbergo School Archive show that he had direct contact with Ricci (ASSM, b. 71 fasc. 109, letter by Rosso to Baldini, dated April 1936). Eventually, only one section of the floor (three iconographies of Hercules) was designed by Achille Capizzano. Tonino Sicoli and Massimo Di Stefano (eds.), *Achille Capizzano. Arte pubblica e arte privata*, (Città di Castello: Edimond, 2010), p. 18.

<sup>98</sup> The documents kept in the ASSM do not name the workshop that collaborated with the Spilimbergo School in piazzale della Vittoria. There is a reference to the Vatican City’s Mosaic Workshop, although no document has been found in the Vatican Archives regarding the Foro Mussolini.

scenes of sportsmen from the historical ones, in which warriors fought against wild animals. The latter were intended as both the primordial progenitors of the former and as a representation of the irrational, anarchic forces of the nature they had to control (figs. 7.29, 7.30). One can therefore interpret the representation of labour and games (figs. 7.31, 7.32) as an intermediary phase, characterised by production (achieved through controlling and exploiting the country's natural and human resources) and leisure (as regulated and organised by the fascist regime). Rosso structured his scheme in accordance with three temporal manifestations of the same 'will to power'. Fascism was promoted as the agent behind Italy's mythic rebirth, and the ONB as its main instrument. Indeed, two circular belts framed the trapezoidal panels: the internal belt featured a giant 'M', displays of weapons (alternating between ancient and modern), and *fasci*. Along the external belt, the words 'DUCE A NOI' and 'OPERA BALILLA' were repeated (fig. 7.33).<sup>99</sup>

Compared to the piazzale della Vittoria, the scheme of the piazzale dell'Impero seems less consistent, from a programmatic point of view. Ricci's priority was his deadline: the mosaics had to be ready for the first anniversary of the conquest of Ethiopia (9 May 1937).<sup>100</sup> The involvement of four different artists, with no precisely assigned thematic ambit or – Severini aside – location, determined the extemporaneous appearance of this *piazzale*. Twenty-one mosaic panels surrounded a central spine, raised up three steps. This was introduced by two parallel panels representing Mars (by Canevari) and Hercules (by Rosso). The decoration ended on the opposite side, in front of Severini's three panels, of which the two sides featured sports, and the largest panel represented an allegory, with Apollo holding a *fascio*, surrounded by the arts and sciences, an eagle, and a lion at the intersection between the two *piazzali*. Eagles, lions, 'M', and stylised fasces decorated the band between the spine and the panels; the word 'DUCE' repeated rhythmically was placed on the external band, next to eleven marble plinths with inscriptions that recounted the history of Fascism and set a pace for the succession of panels along the external borders of the space.

<sup>99</sup> 'A Noi!' was a cry to incite the *Arditi* corps during World War I; it was then appropriated by D'Annunzio's legionaries in Fiume and by the fascists as a call for action and fighting. *Duce a noi!* was the song of the balilla musketeers.

<sup>100</sup> Due to the haste, four panels were left empty – two were filled only in 1941 with designs by Capizzano originally designed for a different location. The thoroughfare was opened on 16 May 1937. ASSM, b. 70, letters by Baldini to Ricci, May 1937.



Although the largest panel was dedicated to Apollo and personifications of the arts, Mars and Hercules, whose panels were strategically located at the threshold of the thoroughfare, were the true pagan protectors of the Foro. They functioned as ‘anchorage’ tools, demonstrating that the core of the fascist discourse on authority was based on war and brutal force.<sup>101</sup> When, with the conquest of Ethiopia, Fascism’s imperial dream materialised, it was felt necessary to add a reference to contemporary historical events to the allegorical discourse. Rosso’s *Il giuramento del Balilla* (The Balilla’s Oath), and *La proclamazione dell’Impero* (the proclamation of the Empire) showed how Fascism had brought the spirit of Mars and Hercules back into the history of modern Italy. Rather than being narrated, the revolution and conquest were alluded to and repositioned against a mythic plan.

*Il giuramento del Balilla* visualised the role of the ONB in Ricci’s vision: to keep alive the fascist revolution.<sup>102</sup> The oath taken by the young *balilla*, the ceremony of the ‘presentation of the rifle’ (fig. 7.34), and a scene representing *balilla* saluting and shouting the word ‘DUCE’ (repeated on the side of the figures: fig. 7.35) framed an episode of *squadristo*,<sup>103</sup> acts of violence against political opponents carried out by fascist action squads between 1919 and 1924. Although the *squadristo* had been brought under control and neutralised as soon as Mussolini took control of the government, it remained a defining element of Fascism as a revolutionary movement. At the centre of his scene, Rosso put a FIAT 18BL truck, carrying a group of assaulting *camice nere* (Blackshirts) (fig. 7.36). This choice may have been a response to *18BL*, the piece of experimental mass theatre staged by Alessandro Blasetti (1900–1987) in Florence for the *Littoriali* of 1934, as this centred on the role of a truck in the victory of Fascism.

Here Rosso acknowledges the iconic status enjoyed by the 18BL in fascist imagery. It features prominently in the composition, and is associated with the dictator, whose

<sup>101</sup> I am using the concept of ‘anchorage’ coined by Roland Barthes: a tool that allows the potential polysemy of the image to be limited. Roland Barthes, ‘Rhetoric of the Image’, in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 35–51.

<sup>102</sup> The words of the balilla’s oath featured on the left-hand side of the panel. When the 1960 Olympic Games were hosted in the Foro, they were erased and replaced with a detail of a lion copied from one of Capizzano’s panels. Vittorio Vidotto, ‘Il mito di Mussolini e le memorie nazionali. Le trasformazioni del Foro Italico 1937–1960’, in *Roma. Architettura e città negli anni della seconda guerra mondiale*, (Rome: Gangemi, 2004), pp. 119, 121.

<sup>103</sup> Ricci had been a *squadrista* in his heyday; he was involved in the infamous Sarzana (21 July 1921), one of the few episodes of armed resistance to the fascist squads before the *Marcia su Roma*.

presence is evoked both by his name (written on its side), and through mottos, such as 'ME NE FREGO' (I don't give a damn!) and 'A NOI', originally coined by Gabriele D'Annunzio during the Great War but appropriated by Mussolini. As in Blasetti's play, where a truck that has served during World War I, the *squadristo*, and the March on Rome is eventually 'sacrificed' when its unusable chassis is used to fill the Pontine Marshes, Rosso too makes a scene of martyrdom the culmination of his composition. If the assaulting *squadristi* are associated with the detail of a knight on horseback killing giant salamanders (top) (fig. 7.37), the scene finds its resolution in the detail of a dying Blackshirt held by a companion, who keeps shooting at their invisible enemy (bottom).<sup>104</sup> Sacrifice and martyrdom were the defining elements of the fascist pseudo-religious cult, the familiar and highly emotional storytelling elements used to win the trust of the Italian people. In the attempt to keep this cult alive, hundreds of fascist shrines (*sacrari*) were built within the *Casa del Fascio* (party headquarters), where elaborate ceremonies took place to pay homage to the names of the fallen and their relics, such as the scarf falling from the shoulders of Rosso's dead Blackshirt.

Rosso developed the same approach in *La proclamazione dell'Impero*. In the middle of the space there is a sentence in bold letters: 'IX MAGGIO XIV ERA FASCISTA L'ITALIA HA FINALMENTE IL SUO IMPERO' (9 May 1936, fourteenth of the fascist era, Italy finally has its empire) (fig. 7.38). The quotation was the acme of Mussolini's speech, as he addressed the crowds gathered in Piazza Venezia three days after General Badoglio's entry into Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. Months of incessant propaganda aimed at presenting the aggression as an act of liberation, and the sanctions as an unjust and hypocritical attempt by the League of Nations to frustrate Italian ambitions, had given Fascism its largest popular consensus.<sup>105</sup> The impact of this pervasive propaganda is clearly visible in Rosso's panel. Around Mussolini's words, he has arranged mechanical, as well as allegorical figures: soldiers in battle and at work, one holding the national flag in front of an Ethiopian raising his hands in the fascist salute, alongside the doomed lion of Judah, symbol of the country. This catalogue of images was drawn from contemporary mass media, including newspapers and the *Istituto LUCE* (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa) newsreels. A compelling anthology of these materials appeared in the

<sup>104</sup> In fascist iconography, dragons and salamanders were used to embody the enemies against which propaganda railed: democracy, Bolshevism, economic sanctions and (after 1938), the Jewish community.

<sup>105</sup> Gentile (2007), p. 128.

documentary, *Il Cammino degli Eroi*, which was presented at the 1936 *Mostra del Cinema* in Venice, where it won the Fascist Party Cup (fig. 7.39).<sup>106</sup> Before watching airplanes and tractors in the battlefield (figs. 7.40, 7.41), spectators were shown how they were assembled in factories, shipped to Mogadishu and Massawa, and transported to the Ethiopian border on new roads and railway tracks constructed by soldiers armed with picks and shovels (fig. 7.42). After only seven minutes of actual fighting (in a sixty-minute film), Badoglio enters Addis Ababa. The documentary ends with the Italian flag raised among saluting Ethiopian hands, and the proclamation of the Empire, three days later, at night in a piazza Venezia crowded with people.

In *Il Cammino degli Eroi*, the dictator was never shown in the flesh: his colossal portrait sculpted into the rocks accompanied the title and opening credits of the documentary, identifying him as the already 'monumentalised' inspirer of heroes on the march. At the end, his voice proclaimed the inevitable victory. After being transformed into an icon constantly repeated and multiplied in hundreds of thousands of images, the dictator's body transcended his physical presence. In a sense, it became an abstract entity, the spirit of Fascism, a voice heard through the radio, or unscripted words set into mosaics. As in the documentary, machines took centre stage in Rosso's panel: two Caproni Ca-133 aircraft and a Fiat OCI 708 tractor represented Italian technological superiority (figs. 7.43, 7.44). Italian soldiers are represented overcoming logistical difficulties by building infrastructures: they have lost no time in their 'mission of civilisation' (fig. 7.46). For this reason, there is no trace of resistance to the advance of civilisation, modernity, and prosperity in what supposedly was a land oppressed by slavery, superstition and corruption (fig. 7.45). The locals can only salute the coming of their liberators, as Achille Beltrame had portrayed the Italian victory in the *Domenica del Corriere*, which Rosso may have recalled (fig. 7.47, 7.48). Rosso's animals have allegorical aims: the lion of Judah is finally tamed, while the airplanes are coupled with eagles, once again using an antique symbol of imperial Rome to re-signify ideologically an otherwise neutral piece of technology.

Rosso represented contemporary events by using a pastiche of images produced by the controlled media. Since 1926, the projection of LUCE newsreels had been compulsory in

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<sup>106</sup> Corrado D'Errico, 1936, 68:45, b/n, sound.

all cinemas around the country.<sup>107</sup> The themes to which the Italian people were constantly exposed included a cult of fascist martyrs and celebrations of the ‘*res gestae*’ of fascist squads, choreographies of the *balilla*, the almost transcendental figure of the *Duce*, and rhetoric about Italy’s imperialist civilising mission and destiny, as presaged by its Roman past and legitimised by its supposed technological supremacy. Rosso’s fragmentary compositions relied on observers to make sense of them. His panels were mosaic photo-collages aimed at producing a multi-sensory experience of déjà-vu in his audience.<sup>108</sup> The ubiquitous presence of the written word allowed viewers to re-create the parades using their memories and imagination fired-up by the propaganda. At the same time, the absence of narrative and the collage-like appearance of these mosaics contributed to their paratactic structure. According to Spackman, parataxis was well-suited to creating a populist interpellation of the people, as well as for creating a typology of discourse that aimed at ‘determining an emotional consensus; an unconditional consensus of a religious sort.’<sup>109</sup> In visualising the myths of Fascism, as derived from the pervasive propaganda of the regime, Rosso exposed its discursive myth-making technique.

#### 7.4 The permanent and the temporary: two modes of Fascism’s self-representation

With the conquest of Ethiopia, the balance between the two sides of Fascism’s self-definition – tradition and modernity – shifted towards the former. The imperial destiny underpinning its political discourse suddenly, and with unexpected rapidity, was fulfilled. A time of celebration therefore began, in which the present and its relationship with the past overshadowed projections toward the future. ‘Eternal classicism’ was the language increasingly used to convey Fascism’s imperial rebirth.<sup>110</sup> From the mid-1930s onwards, Roman imperial iconography dominated the visual culture promoted by the regime, even when Fascism was presenting itself as modernising agent. One particular event that signalled this shift was the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* (MAR), organised

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<sup>107</sup> Malvano (1988), pp. 32–33.

<sup>108</sup> Rosso was familiar with the technique of ‘photo-collaging’: photographs of photomontages of his own works are kept in the AGR; they were probably made to advertise his artistry. In the official guide of the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* (1937), he is acknowledged for his contribution to designing the photomontages. Giglioli (1937), p. XXVIII.

<sup>109</sup> Spackman (1996), pp. 116, 122.

<sup>110</sup> Gianfranco Spagnesi, ‘Diversità verso la Modernità. All’origine della Contemporaneità’, in Maria Luisa Neri (ed.), *L’Altra modernità nella cultura architettonica italiana del XX secolo*, (Rome: Gangemi, 2011), p. 59.

in 1937 to celebrate the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Emperor Augustus.<sup>111</sup>

Although, like the MRF, this exhibition was held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, it adopted a different concept and approach. In 1932, the MRF had retold the history of Italy since World War I to present Fascism as the inevitable outcome of the sacrifices endured by the country, whose frustrated nationalistic ambitions had been redeemed by Mussolini's revolution. It aimed to present Fascism as an innovative spiritual and political force able to reshape the state. By contrast, the MAR gave the regime's colonial conquest of Ethiopia a pre-modern historical precedent by tracing the origins of Fascism and its imperialist policy back to the Augustan period. It created an association between Augustus and Mussolini, presenting them both as redeemers of the country, conquerors of the empire, and peacemakers of Europe. While definitely sanctioning the idea of Rome as the preferred reference point for the construction of its identity, the MAR presented Fascism as a perennial seed, destined to revive whenever an inspired *deus ex machina* appeared. At the same time, rather than forms of temporary spectacles, its preferred mode of self-identification became the monument. In a tone of unconditional surrender, rationalist architect Gino Pollini (1903–1991) wrote in a letter recommending his studio's design for one of the E42 permanent buildings that 'we have tried to achieve a maximum of monumentality'.<sup>112</sup> Artists were faced with a public patron that, by defining the elements that made up its identity in increasingly stricter terms, inevitably affected their options for expression.

After 1937, Rosso was asked to design mosaics 'in the style of those of the Foro' by public bodies such as the ETAL, the ONB, the Ministry of Communications (for the portico of the Ostiense railway station, with Maria Zaffuto) and the E42 Office (for the fountain of the Offices Building, with Severini and Giovanni Guerrini).<sup>113</sup> In these works, one sees a slight shift towards a more controlled and less adventurous interpretation of Fascism as the revolutionary agent that was projecting Italy on the path of glory – Rosso's figuration

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<sup>111</sup> Flavia Marcello, 'Mussolini e l'idealizzazione dell'impero: la Mostra Augustea della Romanità', *Modern Italy*, 3 (2011), 223–247.

<sup>112</sup> ACS, Fondo Minnucci, b. 105, f. 126. Letter to Minnucci dated 07/05/1938. Pollini and Figini, members of the Gruppo 7, were competing for the Palace of the Army.

<sup>113</sup> On 10 July 1937, architect Luigi Piccinato requested a quotation for a black and white mosaic panel (never to be made) to be designed by Rosso for the Casa Balilla of Potenza (Basilicata region). ASSM, b. 91, fasc. 'Pannello casa Balilla Benevento'.

seems to immortalise a time suspended, rather than advancing. Once again, Rosso adjusted his approach to suit different spaces, although in these cases, as all of these venues had a similar function – to accommodate mass spectacles – the element to which he responded was their diverse permanence. In spaces built to leave a permanent material trace of Fascism, Rosso favoured solutions similar to those he had experimented with in the Foro, although they lacked the intriguing conflation of mythic, historical, and contemporary references. By contrast, the regime's temporary display spaces offered Rosso an opportunity to address different aspects of their complex identities in more original ways.

In 1938, Mussolini began to plan for a world exhibition to be held in Rome to celebrate the twenty years of the regime: its theme was an *Olimpiade delle civiltà*. This was an opportunity to build an entire new complex of buildings in the capital as a permanent sign of Fascism. Although initially (and typically, considering the ambivalence of the fascist cultural policy), Giuseppe Pagano and three other architects of modern tendencies were meant to co-operate with Marcello Piacentini in the planning of the new area, the latter eventually prevailed. The E42 marked a triumph for architects following the 'third way', i.e. those who used a stripped neo-classicism, traditional plans, distribution, and elevations to visualize a continuity with the past.<sup>114</sup> Rosso participated in the decorative enterprise of the E42, creating schemes both for the new quarter and for the Ostiense railway station, on which I want to focus. His designs reveal how he interpreted the regime's emphasis on eternity and monumentality to enhance its identity through the 'timeless' architecture of the E42.<sup>115</sup>

The Ostiense railway station (Roberto Narducci, 1940) was rebuilt and rebranded as the official terminal for guests of honour arriving from abroad to visit the World Exhibition. The mosaics that Rosso designed for the portico suggest an increasingly problematic role for the artists who accepted the patronage of the fascist regime. In this case, a lavish decorative scheme (including sculptures, frescos, and mosaics) was requested, focusing on the myth of Rome and its dominion over the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>116</sup> The mosaics were

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<sup>114</sup> Pagano wrote bitterly of the '*occasioni perdute*' ('lost opportunities') of modern Italian architecture, in *Casabella*, 158 (1941), 7–23.

<sup>115</sup> Carlo Melograni, *Architettura Italiana sotto il fascismo*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), p. 155.

<sup>116</sup> ASFFSS, Stazione Ostiense, bb. 1252, 1257. Rosso signed the contract in January 1940: he was commissioned to create eleven cartoons covering a surface of 140 square meters. The station was built in

entrusted to Rosso and to the artist Maria Immacolata Zaffuto (1888–1943).<sup>117</sup> The latter designed the internal schemes: symbolic representations of Victory and the ancient Ostia harbour. Rosso decorated the portico facing the wide square in front of the station with five scenes recounting the history of Rome, from its origin, through the foundation of the empire and the spread of Christendom, until the rise of Fascism (fig. 7.49).<sup>118</sup> These scenes alternated with smaller panels (apart from the central panel, which was also the largest) featuring ships, horses and carriages, and other modes of transportation that hinted at the function of the station (fig. 7.50). Rosso used his collage technique to create these historical episodes, pulling together different images with different orientations: to appreciate the whole scheme, an observer had to move around them, using clues to reconstruct each historical episode (fig. 7.51). The narrative culminated in a final scene, in which the genius of Fascism was represented as a naked young man saluting, surrounded by swords and eagles; at his foot lay a giant salamander, killed by a spear (fig. 7.52). This figure was strategically placed in front of the exit of the Hall of Honour, under Rodolfo Maleci's wall relief representing an imperial eagle.

LUCE newsreels of the time demonstrate that these mosaics were designed considering carefully the ceremonies that would be carried out in the station.<sup>119</sup> Special guests were welcomed by the authorities on the platform. They then crossed the hall and reviewed the guard of honour along the portico. At the end of this space was a relief of *Fascist Italy following in the footsteps of Roman civilisation* by Giorgio Giordani. The guests would stand beneath this image until their vehicles arrived to take them away. As they passed through the portico, the fascist authorities and their guests would walk over mosaics that traced the history of Italy in reverse, revealing, as the ceremony unfolded, the mythic origin of Fascism and the nation's imperial destiny. Newsreels of the time, however, clearly show the mosaics partly covered by carpets on these occasions, compromising their ritual and inaugural re-enactment of history. Deprived of an opportunity to communicate, these mosaics became a superficial feature of the

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place of the temporary pavilion designed by Narducci to welcome Adolf Hitler, during his state visit in May 1938.

<sup>117</sup> Pier Paolo Pancotto, *Artiste a Roma nella prima metà del '900*, (Rome: Palombi, 2006), p. 238.

<sup>118</sup> Sylvia Diebner, 'Imperialismo e arte nella stazione Ostiense a Roma. L'uso delle immagini come strumento politico nel periodo fascista', *Revista de Historiografía*, 5 (2006), 156–165. Diebner erroneously attributes to Rosso the panel in the Hall of Honour.

<sup>119</sup> *La delegazione croata a Roma*, *Giornale LUCE* C0146, 22/05/1941.

architecture, their black and white tesserae (made of relatively cheap ceramic) giving the space a luxury finish with a flavour of antiquity.<sup>120</sup>

By contrast, the large, thematic exhibitions organised to display the achievements of the regime in every department of government still offered artists the possibility to engage with mass audiences in original ways; in these contexts, aesthetic pluralism was still valued and encouraged. Writing in 1941, Giuseppe Pagano noted that the ephemeral nature of these spaces was a pivotal factor for modern architects and designers, enabling them to experiment with a frank and functionalist visual language.<sup>121</sup> Rosso approached the schemes he designed for the *Mostra Autarchica del Minerale Italiano* in Rome (1938–39) and the temporary pavilion of *Roma Antica sul Mare* (Ancient Rome and the sea) within the first *Triennale d'Oltremare* in Naples (1940), very differently from the 'classic' mosaics for the E42.

The *Mostra Autarchica* showcased the success of the regime in exploiting and transforming mineral resources and inventing new materials to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations in retaliation for the occupation of Ethiopia.<sup>122</sup> The vast mural that Rosso designed in the Sulphur Pavilion (built by Gino Franzi and Pietro Lombardi) drew on his experience of commercial decoration (Chapter 6).<sup>123</sup> He focused on the product, illustrating the process through a schematic, almost diagrammatic, composition that associated simple and engaging vignettes (for example, sulphur being used in industry and agriculture) with a highly stylised representation of the process (fig. 7.53). Rosso boosted the educational purpose of the exhibition, exalting the benefits of production in the daily lives of consumers, while acknowledging its scientific and technological core. Within the space of the pavilion, while other elements in the exhibit aimed to create emotional involvement, Rosso's mural offered the audience a clear and accessible content.

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<sup>120</sup> ASSM, b. 91, 'Fasc. Pavimento Stazione Ostiense', letter from Baldini to Rosso, 28/12/1939.

<sup>121</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, 'Parliamo un pò di esposizioni', *Costruzioni-Casabella*, 159–160 (1941), 1; Silvia Cecchini, 'Musei e mostre d'arte negli anni trenta: L'Italia e la cooperazione intellettuale', in Maria Ida Catalano (ed.), *Snodi di Critica*, (Rome: Gangemi, 2008), pp. 57–105.

<sup>122</sup> Although the sanctions were withdrawn in July 1936, the regime continued to use them as a recurrent theme for propaganda.

<sup>123</sup> PNF (Partito Nazionale Fascista), *L'Autarchia del Minerale Italiano – Guida della Mostra*, (Rome: Editrice Nazionale Anonima, 1938), p. 90.



Visitors entered by a cavernous gate that led to an underground space that re-enacted the harsh working conditions of miners, their self-sacrifice and heroism; they then re-emerged into the central hall. This large dark space featured dramatically lit numbers indicating the amount of sulphur being exported in 1937. One statue represented the advance of the Italian economy; a photomontage showed the *Duce* as a miner. There was also a 'cascade of gold,' lit by a 'violent flash of light' (fig. 7.54). Rosso's fresco was placed on the opposite side in a tailored space: an illuminated corridor with a low ceiling that, in contrast to the darkness of the rest of the pavilion, used a different mode of communication. In a context designed 'to impress upon the minds of the visitors the importance of the industry', Rosso presented the regime as the rationalising agent 'of the victory of men and technique over the brute forces of nature,' thanks to which prosperity was being achieved for the entire country.<sup>124</sup> The temporary and technical nature of the *Mostra Autarchica* gave Rosso a rare chance to transcend the ubiquitous imperial iconographies.

The temporary nature of some displays seemed to facilitate a less 'classical' approach to *romanitas* itself. In the Triennale d'Oltremare (1939–40), Rosso contributed mural paintings to two galleries of the '*Roma antica sul mare*' pavilion (architect: Marcello Canino). This was the title of a lecture given by Mussolini at the University of Perugia on 5 October 1926, in which he reconstructed the phases of Roman expansion, quoting ancient writers.<sup>125</sup> Rosso reconstructed Mussolini's storytelling, associating maps of the Mediterranean Sea with quotations and statuettes representing the traditional arts of populations that, in various periods, had dominated the sea.<sup>126</sup> The sequence of maps (like the marble maps along the via dell'Impero, Rome) synthesised the historical account into stages of an unstoppable expansion. The quotations from ancient sources supported the images, while the pieces of art defined populations that, sooner or later, were subjugated by the Romans as 'others' – bearers of a different, ostensibly non-classical visual culture. For example, Rosso featured a statuette of the god Baal Amon and a theatrical mask from Cartago as examples of Phoenician art (fig. 7.55).<sup>127</sup> Yet, in the mural *The Romans, Master of the Mediterranean*, a collage of sculpted portraits of

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>125</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Roma Antica sul Mare*, (Milan: Mondadori 1926).

<sup>126</sup> *Prima Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare*, (Napoli: 1940), p. 204.

<sup>127</sup> Vincenzo Costantini, 'Opere d'arte alla mostra', *Emporium*, 548 (1940), 67–69, 94.

emperors and a figure to the right (perhaps depicting a young Neptune sanctioning their dominion over the seas?) are drawn with a coarseness that recalls 'barbaric' copies from the peripheral provinces of the empire, rather than the refined classicism of official Augustan art (fig. 7.56). At the same time, the characters who accompany Aeneas into Sicily, Cumae, and Lazio (second gallery) are depicted in a way that seems to highlight their humble humanity, rather than their heroism (fig. 7.57).

Once again, Rosso adapts propaganda techniques borrowed from other fields. These murals reinterpret display solution used in earlier propaganda exhibitions. Rosso's imperial portraits, for example, recall photographic portraits assembled by Nizzoli in the *Salone della Vittoria* of the 1936 Triennale (fig. 7.58). In his combination of statues, maps, and texts, Rosso deliberately translates into visual images the design of the MAR (fig. 7.59). The decorator told the story using the mechanisms and solutions adopted by historians and archaeologists to reconstruct history as the regime wanted it told. Yet, while the MAR aimed to display the best examples of the quintessentially classical arts of the Augustan period, Rosso's *romanitas* is anti-classical.<sup>128</sup> Once again, he sides with the painters of the Scuola Romana, who were experimenting with alternative ways of reinterpreting the myth of Rome in their (rare and often controversial) engagements with public art. Cagli's panels for the Italian Pavilion of the Paris 1937 World Exhibition (fig. 7.60–7.61), Mario Mafai's *Triumph of Caesar* in the GIL building in Trastevere, Rome (architect Luigi Moretti) (fig. 7.62), and the mosaic designed by Alberto Ziveri for the Firemen's Academy in Rome (fig. 7.63) are all examples of an approach that, rather than referencing illustrious works, acknowledged as models, looks at popular and folk expressions in its attempt to resurrect the past in the present.<sup>129</sup>

### **Conclusion.** A conformist decorator under an authoritarian regime

In his 'Little inquest on the Palazzo di Giustizia', Raffaello Giolli affirmed that only a few of the artists whom Piacentini involved in decorating the huge Courts of Law in Milan (1938–39) created anything significant while remaining faithful to their individual

<sup>128</sup> Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, *Roma. L'arte al centro del potere*, first edition 1969, (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005), p. 212.

<sup>129</sup> According to Simona Salvo, the portraits of the Roman emperors in the Hall of Honour and the stuccoworks that decorated the loggia of Moretti's GIL were designed by Giulio Rosso, who is likely to have seen Mafai's fresco. Simona Salvo 'Il restauro della ex 'Casa Gil' di Trastevere a Roma, Luigi Moretti (1932–1935)', in Giovanni Carbonara (ed.), *Trattato di Restauro architettonico. III aggiornamento*, 2 vols., (Turin: Utet, 2008), I, p. 261.

expressions (Campigli, Martini, and Severini). All of the others, including Rosso (fig. 7.64), merely adapted their approach to Piacentini's architecture, which he considered academic and irrational. However, other critics, although equally unimpressed with the murals, cited opposing causes. Giolli mentioned Raffaele Calzini, who, in *Architettura*, criticised the artists he had praised, and many others, 'for a misunderstood sense of artistic independence': they had ignored the 'austere simplicity' of Piacentini's architecture.<sup>130</sup> Almost ten years after the publication of the *Manifesto della Pittura Murale*, the fundamental question discussed in Chapter 2 remained the same: was architectural decoration meant to be an original and challenging definition of space, or a controlled work of signification carried out under the strict supervision of an architect? Each case provided a different scenario, with different results depending on the nature of the space and the relationship between patrons, architects, and artists/decorators.

The fascist regime, in its non-linear process of self-definition, allowed artists to formulate different proposals, as well as create images of intrinsic complexity that could lead to multi-layered interpretations. Never before had artists been so thoroughly supported by public patronage. Experimentation was allowed but not consistently: artists were restricted by the strict, though intermittent, control of architects and patrons. Artworks designed for temporary contexts were destined to disappear, frustrating their creators' efforts. Except in a few cases, original proposals were often random, the occasional outcome of an artist's ability to take advantage of favourable circumstances. Many publicly sponsored works of art proved controversial, causing arguments and censorship. Cagli's panels for Paris 1937 are an example – removed and believed to have been destroyed, they were actually saved and are now in private and public collections. His fresco for the GIL building of Castel de Cesari in Rome was whitewashed. Piacentini himself had problems when his Palazzo di Giustizia in Milan (1929–1940) was opened and the authorities saw the more than one hundred murals adorning the building: many were covered with curtains because their subjects were taken from the Old Testament ('i sepolti vivi' – 'the buried alive').<sup>131</sup> By the end of the decade, many artists were exhausted by the regime's ever-increasing attempts to

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<sup>130</sup> Raffaello Giolli, 'Piccola inchiesta sul palazzo di Giustizia', *Costruzioni-Casabella*, 179 (1942), 29–30. Artists could choose among subjects related to the theme of justice from Roman history and the Bible, the achievements of the regime or allegories. Fagone (1999), pp. 25–43, 212.

<sup>131</sup> Antonella Greco, 'Il Palazzo di Giustizia di Milano e la questione dei "sepolti vivi"', in Simonetta Lux (ed.), *Avanguardia, Tradizione, Ideologia*, (Rome: Bagatto libri, 1990).

control them. A fundamental mistrust (or fear) of their creativity animated the impresario-bureaucrats.

As a decorator, Rosso was in an ideal position: his practice had prepared him to negotiate with his patron's aspirations, the architect's desires, and the characteristics of the space. As a result, he sustained a successful career, continuously supported by public patronage, until the beginning of World War II. Rosso's son, Edoardo, denies that his father took any interest in politics, and the fact that he was late to join the fascist party may confirm this.<sup>132</sup> Nevertheless, he conformed to and participated in the definition of Fascism's visual discourse. His experience confirms the fact that Italian artists consistently collaborated with the regime.<sup>133</sup> Rosso's public murals and mosaic floors exemplify the dynamics described above. When he was co-opted into the seminal event of Italian muralism – the 1933 Triennale – he produced a fresco that diverged from his previous productions, representing a personal, brave, and uncompromising proposal for a fascist mural art. Afterwards, his approach changed, adapting to the briefs dictated by various contexts. In permanent venues, such as the Palazzo dell'Economia Corporativa, the Città Universitaria, the mosaics for the Palazzo degli Uffici of the E42 and the Ostiense railway station, Rosso's work was conventional. It became more original in temporary settings, such as propaganda exhibitions, or venues where the space had multiple functions, allowing a variation of registers within the same project.

In mosaics for the Foro Mussolini, for example, Rosso used a photo-collage approach derived from both the modern exhibition culture promoted by rationalists with its 'propagandistic and advertising' aims, and the new communication technique of cinematography, immediately enlisted by the regime to reach the masses.<sup>134</sup> A few meters away, he created images of pure propagandistic intent: compositions involving weapons and flags; a scene showing hard-working labourers building the prosperity of the state; and all the eagles, lions, bulls, and salamanders of the usual fascist menagerie. Five hundred meters further away, in the small swimming pool of the *Termae*, Rosso introduced an exhilarating procession of circus animals, a thematic choice so unusual as

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<sup>132</sup> Edoardo Rosso, personal interview, 02/02/2014. Rosso's membership number for the PNF was 597516. ACS, Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale AABBA, Div. VI, 1936/40, b. 78, fasc. 'Incarichi'. In 1945, he declared that he had joined the party in 1938, ACS, Ministero Pubblica Istruzione, Direzione Generale AABBA, Div. VI, 1941/45, b. 71, fasc. 'Epurazioni'.

<sup>133</sup> Benzi (2013), p. 17.

<sup>134</sup> Giovanni Pacchioni, 'Le mostre d'arte e il pubblico', *Le Arti*, 2–3 (1939–40), 180.

to be almost parodic. However, what seems a compelling subversion of the fascist discourse on dominion and control over the natural world was designed for a peripheral space in which the patron's desire to indoctrinate overlapped and confused with the purposes of leisure. Here Rosso once again acted as a decorator, responding, with humour, to the shifting identity of the space. Rosso never used his art solely to express the representative needs of others: his negotiations always took into consideration his own interpretation. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, there were episodes in which Rosso expressed a personal and innovative vision that contrasted with the dominant discourse of architecture (INFPS, Rome), or with his own public image (his apartment in via Nimorense; the murals for the 1930 and 1933 Triennale). It therefore makes sense to ask whether, episodes of discontinuity and ambiguity in his mosaics for the Foro could be an expression of creative difficulty or of resistance to a patron who had increasingly grown suspicious of experimentation. It is difficult to answer this question. I believe that Rosso's reference to alternative means of visual communication, such as photomontage and documentaries, confirms an increasing scepticism towards his own practice that I have already highlighted in Chapter 6. By borrowing the fragmented approach of the new media, Rosso seems to acknowledge their advance into a role that was traditionally the prerogative of architectural decoration: telling stories to the masses and immortalising the myths and heroic gestures of history.

In the panel representing *The Arts* in the piazzale dell'Impero (fig. 7.65), painting is represented as both easel painting and mural decoration, reflecting the debate that underpins my assessment of Rosso's decorative practice throughout the *ventennio*. On the left-hand side of the scaffolding, where the mural decorator is patiently finishing two large figures of a man and a woman, a little monkey is trying to steal a can (7.66). Rosso seems to hint at an iconographical tradition that associates apes with artists, based on their ability to imitate.<sup>135</sup> There is, of course, an element of ambiguity in this image, and Rosso's target is therefore uncertain. However, the fact that the monkey is on the scaffolding, where the regime's mural and public art was created, as well as Rosso's own main works, makes one wonder whether this could be a projection of his own feelings: a humorous meditation on the condition of the conformist decorator under an authoritarian regime.

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<sup>135</sup> W. Horst Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, (London: Warburg Institute, 1952), pp. 295–314.

**Conclusion.** In defence of Giulio Rosso, '*decoratore di muri*'<sup>1</sup>



Giulio Rosso, *Self-caricature*, 1927; *Il Fauno Galante*, (Rome: Edizioni d'Arte il Fauno, 1927)

## 1. Oblivion

He is elegant and glamorous. The hair is slightly untidy, the thin line of the lips gently curved in a sardonic smile below the long nose; between the eyes, almost closed behind the round glasses, is a crown of wrinkles, like those of someone who constantly scrutinises the world around him. Giulio Rosso holds a cigarette with his right hand angled, like a film star, while the left one is placed below his right elbow to close the composition. Next to him, instead of the usual attributes of a painter, a small vase with a tiny little flower has been casually placed. This is how the decorator represented himself in a self-caricature for the *Edizioni d'Arte il Fauno* publishing house, founded by Giuseppe Zucca, for which he had provided illustrations.<sup>2</sup> It was 1927 and Rosso had achieved resounding success. He was collaborating with one of the most influential

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<sup>1</sup> On the cover of a scrapbook of press clippings about his work, Rosso defined himself as a '*decoratore di muri con erbuzze, pupattoli e quanto altro madre natura volle farmi godere in sua figliolanza*' (a decorator of walls, with grass, puppets, and anything else mother nature has bestowed on me). AGR, documents.

<sup>2</sup> Rosso was asked to provide illustrations for *Il Fauno Galante* ('The Gallant Faun'), the first book of romance series published by Il Fauno. In 1926, he illustrated the second volume of the 'Il Fauno Giallo' series, dedicated to humorous literature: *La donna in vetrina*, by Luigi Antonelli (1877–1942). 'Il Fauno giallo', *Il Tevere*, 02/02/1926, p. 3.

architects of the time, Marcello Piacentini. He had won the *Pensionato Artistico*, was about to begin teaching at the MAI, and was regarded by critics and intellectuals, including Gio Ponti and Roberto Papini, as one of the best modern Italian decorators. To top it off, after decades of decadence and prejudice, decoration was once more on the rise: new spaces, new tastes, and new aspirations required the imaginative efforts of decorators able to balance a knowledge of tradition with an awareness of up-to-date artistic trends developed abroad. Decorators enhanced architecture by adding graciousness, spirit, glamour, and humour. Rosso presented himself as the master of a modern, amusing decorative approach.

A different time was about to emerge, however. Fine artists were beginning to declare their dissatisfaction with the salon piece. They wanted to re-engage with the walls and floors of architecture, in order to regain a role in society that they had allegedly lost when the rise of the private art market and the consecration of salons as artistic centres separated them from ordinary people. These new times, fatally, also included the revolution that Fascism pretended to have brought to Italy. Mussolini needed the arts; fine artists, for their part, were keen to have generously paid public commissions with relatively loose stylistic prescriptions. Mario Sironi, with his saturnine appearance, hands on his waist like the *Duce*, or working, bare-chested, on scaffolding, embodied – body and soul – the artist of the regime. Rosso was caught up in this new enthusiasm for decorated walls and floors in public spaces. Adapting and morally conforming, he became one of many tireless providers of images of and for the regime, both in Italy and in the colonies. However, his metamorphosis from the elegant and refined Art Deco decorator ‘à la mode’ into a propaganda designer was neither sudden nor complete. From the beginning of the 1930s, commissions multiplied for Rosso, who designed for private as well as public patrons, collaborating with different architects who worked in different styles, and engaging with different genres and creative fields.

When war broke out, Rosso was unemployed for four years (receiving his last commission in 1941). During this time, he must have relied on the small teaching salary provided by the MAI. With no space or object to decorate, Rosso drew small ink-on-paper landscapes of Bellegra, a small town near Rome where he had a holiday house (fig. 8.1).<sup>3</sup> Above all, in 1943–44, he painted small group portraits in tempera on wood,

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Due disegni di paese di Giulio Rosso’, *Domus*, 186 (1943), 286.

now in the archive in Sao Paulo.<sup>4</sup> The themes of these paintings recall the figures who appear in his BNL mural in Rome: humble people, shown watching a circus number performed by actors dressed as characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, in (mute) conversation around a table, in the fields, and in the streets of a town (fig. 8.2–8.4). Although Rosso's palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones, his figures seem frozen in an eternal, anxious moment of waiting, as if they had been asked to pose for a photograph that will never be taken. Here and there, someone plays a guitar, a kid reaches for a toy, and youngsters play a game of *bocce*. However, the action is suspended and the mood is far from happiness or enjoyment. The pink train toy is far away; next to the *bocce* game, a brawl is about to explode. Although the guitarist is playing passionately, everyone is staring, with worried expressions, at a boy in the middle of the scene. He, in turn, looks at us with an intense glare, as if to say, 'when is it going to finish, this nightmare of yours?'

These small works confirm Rosso's admiration for the realism of the Scuola Romana, the last style he appropriated to enrich his range of languages and decorative forms. The fact that he used it in these small, intimate easel works, reveals his alignment with the artists who, during the final years of the regime, represented the avant-garde in Rome. When Rosso exhibited the paintings in his first solo show at the La Colonna gallery in Rome, they did not receive positive reviews. One critical assessment, written by a mysterious reviewer who signed him or herself 'V.', is extremely significant because it allows us to understand the radical changes in the cultural context of Rome after its liberation from twenty long years of dictatorship (April 1944). The commentator, who introduced Rosso as 'famous and appreciated as fresco painter and for works with decorative character', argued that the paintings did not reach 'the perfection of art', although they represented 'a brave and sincere reaction to his own past, necessarily rhetorical and conventional'. Present and future artistic experiences could be assessed only when a reaction to the conformist past was evident; art could be valued only in terms of new beginnings, new directions, and new perspectives. I doubt that Rosso was

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<sup>4</sup> AGR, Documents, Ministero delle Finanze, Direz. Gen. delle dogane e delle imposte dirette, 'Licenza di esportazione', 27/05/1946.



consoled by being considered a ‘personality from whom much is to be expected’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, he did take the opportunity to start again, although somewhere else.

On 26 June 1946, he arrived in Rio de Janeiro, accompanying some mosaics, which he had designed for the Matarazzo Building in Sao Paulo (Chapter 5). With him, he brought the paintings he had produced during the war and a letter of recommendation signed by Marcello Piacentini. These clearly show that he had organised the long journey to Brazil because he wanted to leave Italy for good and settle in South America. Piacentini’s letter was addressed to the influential entrepreneur, Osvaldo Riso. In another letter to Riso, dated early 1945, the architect confessed that both he and the architect Ballio Morpurgo (both involved in the design of the Matarazzo Building) were considering relocating to Brazil, as ‘in Italy there will be little to design in the next few years’.<sup>6</sup> Piacentini seemed more preoccupied with the lack of commissions than with the sudden change of regime. There were promising opportunities in Brazil. I do not think that Rosso relocated for political reasons. Artists and architects (Piacentini included) who had been more consistently and passionately involved in Fascism than Rosso did not leave the country, and were able to resume their careers once the political and social situation was resolved. According to his son, Edoardo, Rosso was driven by the need to find new work opportunities, as well as by increasing concerns that another conflict could involve his young son. Thanks to the initial support of the Matarazzo family (for whom, after his arrival, he decorated the chapel of Saint Francis in their *fazenda* Amalia in Campinas), Rosso once more became a sought-after designer of interiors for the entrepreneurial high-bourgeoisie of Sao Paulo. He branded himself *O decorador das mais finas residencias* (the decorator of the finest mansions), beginning a new phase of his career, which is yet to be investigated (fig. 8.5).

Meanwhile, in Italy, his name was forgotten. His works adjusted badly to changing taste and fashions. ‘Objects with iconic or associational value are preserved, but when they lose that association [...] they become disposable’ Julius Prown has argued.<sup>7</sup> The cultural

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<sup>5</sup> AGR, press clippings, V., ‘Giulio Rosso alla “Campana”’.

<sup>6</sup> In March 1947, Mr. Riso wrote to Piacentini that Rosso and his family (who had arrived in January) had visited him, bringing the letter of presentation mentioned above. Although he had an ‘excellent impression’ of the decorator, Riso wrote, ‘the moment was not the most favourable. However, I will support him in the best way I can.’ AFAUF, Fondo Piacentini, B. 285.2.

<sup>7</sup> Julius David Prown, ‘Mind in Matter: an introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 1 (1982), 4.

value attached to objects by those who interact with them is transient. Interior decoration, which depends on the meaning and function its inhabitants attach to particular spaces, is subject to change. In this sense, commercial and leisure decoration is even more disposable; it must adapt to rapidly shifting exigencies and fantasies that consumerist culture feeds and is fed by. The fate of the mosaics of Casa Ricordi Milan shows that decorations rarely survive the new uses devised for their spaces: destruction is the norm. Rosso's domestic decorations have been preserved only in extremely rare cases, such as Casa Molle in Rome. His commercial and leisure schemes were sometimes erased just a few years after being installed. Rosso's applied arts – lace, tapestries, glassworks, furniture, and panels – rapidly became old fashioned and were largely dispersed. Paradoxically, although some of the decorative schemes commissioned by the regime were destroyed or whitewashed as an expression of the anti-fascist reaction that overtook Italy after the fall of the dictator, Rosso's murals and, above all, his mosaics designed during the second half of the 1930s have largely survived.

This resilience is surprising; after all, as these works had a strong associational link to Fascism, they should have been destined for destruction. There are a number of possible explanations for this outcome. The transferral, through political metamorphosis, of many personalities active during the regime into democratic institutions may be one, as well as the persistence of elements of fascist ideology in Italian culture and mentality. It may have been more of a priority, once the country was stable again, to reconstruct what had been destroyed, rather than carrying out other destructions. Finally, and, I think, more importantly, the Italian tradition of preserving public art and architecture may have played a pivotal role. Following the prevalently Idealist philosophical stance of Benedetto Croce, the country tended to appreciate heritage as something detached from its political and social original context, and to conserve it for its formal and aesthetic values. Rosso's works have been deemed worthy of being spared because they communicate aesthetic, formal, and technical qualities. Yet, the toll paid to preserve them has been an oblivion surrounding their circumstances, patrons, functions, and designers.

This staunch denial of interpretation has promoted, rather than avoided, revisionism. There cannot be proper conservation without an understanding of the values a community wishes to preserve: these works should not be feared, but accepted and

analysed. It is amnesia that must be avoided; a mature critical engagement must assess the traces of the past, once their status as significant testimonies has been acknowledged.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Engagement

My aim in this dissertation has been to contribute to the understanding of the arts of a controversial period of Italian history, by shedding light on a little-explored creative output conducted within the practice of decoration. Through an investigation of Rosso's own archive in Sao Paulo and other various archives, magazines, and catalogues of the period, as well as by analysing post-war fragmentary references made to his work by scholars and researchers, and verifying the existence of some of his surviving decorative schemes, I have reconstructed a comprehensive and reliable account of his oeuvre. This production, spanning the years from 1919 to 1941, is, in itself, a remarkable achievement, in terms of quantity, quality, and variety. It reveals the high esteem in which Rosso was held by architects, who consistently collaborated with him; by intellectuals who looked at his productions with interest; by manufacturers who trusted him to modernise their traditional crafts; and by corporations, public bodies, and private patrons who asked him to visualise their aspirations, status, class, authority, power, and identities.

In order to make this tremendous creative effort, Rosso relied on his facility of invention, and above all, on his ability to revive themes, solutions, and motifs borrowed from traditional repertoires and contemporary visual culture. He also absorbed an unprecedented influx of new and exciting media. In his decorative practice, Rosso was the worthy heir of his master Galileo Chini, who was celebrated precisely for:

'his propensity to seesaw diverse formal registers, to run simultaneously on multiple stylistic tracks, in deference to the client or in adherence to situations, as well as to let his own chameleonic, humorous attitude go in the multitude of works, in the incredible amount of square meters of painting, and, not to forget,

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<sup>8</sup> See Dennis P. Doordan, 'In the Shadow of the Fasces: Political Design in Fascist Italy', *Design Issues*, 1 (1997), 51–52.

in the versatile role of set and poster designer, engraver, glassmaker, illustrator, and ceramist.’<sup>9</sup>

Chini, Mario Cozzi argues, must be considered, a 'decorator in the full sense of the term; he is condemned to a slightly superficial bravura by the abundance of craft, the ease and speed with which he responds to the client'.<sup>10</sup> This remark is indicative of the attitude that art historians have towards decorators: an amazed recognition of brilliance, which at the same time cannot disguise a slight disappointment, an expectation of something more, deeper, or different. This approach risks misunderstanding a practice that, as I have demonstrated, is always the result of a complex process of negotiation. The 'ease and speed' with which Chini and Rosso responded to their clients was not just a natural gift bestowed on them and superficially exercised on the surfaces of private mansions, shops, public buildings, hotels, and ocean liners. Rather, it was the result of a genuine mastery, acquired through training and experience in their specific professions. Nevertheless, 'since the canon has to a great degree been formed in relation to pictures hanging in public collections', as Alan Powers rightly observes, 'a painter specialising in murals is apt to lose out.'<sup>11</sup> This is true, not only when decorators are neglected by scholarship, but also when they are (mis)interpreted as fine artists engaging with the decorative.

This dissertation places Rosso's output firmly within the bounds of decoration, a distinct creative practice with different objectives from those of the fine arts. As Filippo Sacchi has pointed out, in his *Apologia del decoratore*, the decorator derives 'the noblest and most fruitful element of the design, its organic character' from the exigencies and finalities dictated by external factors – in other words, from its limits. Later he adds: 'in the decorative object, the functional necessities conflate with the formal [...] to detach the functional necessities from the formal, to consider the latter as secondary or derived is to misunderstand its beauty.'<sup>12</sup> The negotiation with an architect, patron, space and function of the item to be decorated is an essential part of the process. Rosso's output

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<sup>9</sup> Carlo Cresti, 'Da Venezia 1907 a Venezia 1914 attraverso Bangkok', in Carlo Cresti and Corrado Marsan (eds.), *Galileo Chini. Liberty ed Oltre*, (Florence: Arnaud Becocchi, 1989), p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Mauro Cozzi, 'Decorazione e architettura nell'attività fiorentina di Galileo Chini: dagli esordi al primo dopoguerra', in Cresti (1989), p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Powers, *British Murals & Decorative Painting 1920–1960*, (Bristol: Sanson & Co., 2013), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Filippo Sacchi, *Apologia del decoratore*, (Vicenza: Arti Grafiche Vicentine, 1913), pp. 8, 10.

was the product of a strategy that allowed him to do justice to all of these elements of negotiation, while still expressing a recognisable visual language, a personal approach.

Never rejecting tradition, Rosso expanded his decorative repertoire during the interwar period adapting and reinterpreting it. When faced with new typologies of space, new functions, and the new audiences of modern society, Rosso responded by eclectically mixing references, evoking past epochs and, at the same time, engaging with contemporary media (cinema, newsreels, cabaret, and magazine illustration). He bravely projected modern fantasies and myths onto the once-sacred space of popular indoctrination: the surfaces of architecture. To highlight the elements of Rosso's strategy, the second part of this thesis focuses on his responses to the typologies of space that he was asked to decorate. Recurrent themes and solutions, allegories and genres highlight the process of standardisation through which he carried out so many different creative tasks. In fact, a dispassionate approach to decoration has the invaluable ability to desacralise the arts (and the figure of the artist/genius), reconsidering their status as prestigious crafts.

Rosso engaged with a variety of different techniques, studying and mastering the characteristics of each to maximise the decorative impact of his designs. He crossed the boundaries between mural painting, applied arts, and easel painting. As the variety of visual languages he mastered demonstrates, style was just another one of his working tools, rather than a defining element of his creative research. As a virtuoso interpreter, he played with the bold simplification of lines and volumes of the avant-garde, the graciousness of nineteenth-century wall prints, the geometrical abstraction of Pompeian architectural painting, the mystery of the theatrical settings of the *Pittura Metafisica*, the ambiguity of Surrealism, the expressionism of Cagli's *Primordialismo*, and finally, with the realism of the *Scuola Romana*. Rosso's endless variations allowed him to adapt these repertoires to the needs of his patrons. Spaces and objects communicated a meaning, a suggestion to observers, helping them experience a place and offering an impression or a laugh. Rosso's commercial works attracted the public to commodities, impressing them with displays of power, and convincing them of the legitimacy of authority.

Remarkable aesthetic results were achieved by Rosso. His designs for laceworks, widely celebrated in Italy and abroad, effectively reinvented and modernised a tired tradition

through imaginative, modern design that did not hesitate to interweave among its threads references to technology, travel, sports, and cinema. Thanks to the collaboration with Melchiorre Bega, Rosso even experimented with a form of mural lace. Installed in a leisure space with no political or representative function, this lacework reflected Rosso's interest in abstract and surrealist forms that were both highly evocative and strangely unsettling. In the context of the Triennale, Rosso experimented with original approaches to mural art for domestic and public spaces (the *Sala dei Cavallini*, 1930 and *Il Buon Governo*, 1933). While the former, once again featuring a surreal treatment of surfaces, challenged the consistency of the architecture by suggesting an alternative, fantastic space, the latter represented a radical break with his own decorative language, adapting it to satisfy the expectations of the fascist regime.

Afterwards, while acknowledging the conservative nature of the fascist ideology by returning to a more academic approach to figuration, Rosso exploited the regime's aesthetic pluralism to explore possibilities for experimentation. Whenever the context permitted, he followed a personal approach and produced work that was available for unexpected readings, as in the case of the mosaics for the Foro Mussolini. His ambiguous imagery (the circus animals, skeletons and bones, and the elegant, far-from-bellicose athletes) as well as his references to propagandistic cinema and newsreels, mounted together in a sort of collage, present a strange vision to contemporary eyes. This regime art manifests the content, tropes, and structures typical of an authoritarian discourse while, at the same time, introducing elements of its own, ironic, demise. Was this an intentional expression of dissatisfaction?

Lacking the necessary documents, or evidence of clear and consistent conduct on the decorator's part, I have left this question without an answer. In fact, I am not really interested in establishing Rosso's real feelings towards the regime. Although biographical notes have been used to contextualise the works examined, this dissertation does not aim to reconstruct the story of the man. Instead, I have studied his work as a high-quality professional response to a lifelong engagement with patrons, architects, manufacturers, spaces, and objects. Rosso's decorations reveal his involvement with the society of his time: the way he responded to briefs, contributed to culture, and participated in his context, while communicating the values, senses, aspirations, and desires of his contemporaries. Paraphrasing Baxandall, I have

considered Rosso's 'complex problem of good [image]-making [as a] continually self-redefining operation, permanent problem-reformulation'.<sup>13</sup> I believe this can only be properly explained when the rules of the decorator's practice are clarified and its relationship with space treated as pivotal.

There is definitely scope for expanding this investigation. Rosso's production of easel paintings and illustrations has not been explored, due to the limits inherent in the doctoral dissertation form. Episodes of discontinuity, as well as works that I have excluded, sadly, from my discourse, deserve further attention. The same can be said for Rosso's Brazilian productions, in particular his collaboration with rationalist architect Giancarlo Piretti (1906–1977), which could shed light on the contribution of Italian emigrants to local forms of Modernism. There are still a number of professional decorators, active during the first half of the twentieth century, whose works await investigation. In addition, decoration itself, as a practice, needs more attention, especially in relation to the development of the Italian arts in the 1920s and tendencies such as Rationalism.

This dissertation has offered one possible explanation of the decorative practice carried out by Giulio Rosso in Italy during the interwar period. Questionable and certainly amendable as any critical assessment must always be, I hope that, by the end of this long journey, at least one point will be undisputed: Rosso's work does not deserve to be forgotten.



Giulio Rosso, Self-portraits, b/w photographs, 1930; AGR, photographs.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, (London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 73.

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